



Essex High School
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Essex Junction, VT 05452
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Testimony for Pupil Weighting Task Force, October 29, 2021

Household Income Form and Universal School Meals Recommendation

Thank you for listening, my name is Scott Fay, I manage the School Nutrition Program for the Essex Westford School District, I am the current President of the School Nutrition Association of Vermont, and I live in Essex Junction.

I am here to ask you for two recommendations. First, please recommend to the legislature to require Universal School Meals to level the playing field for students, regardless of how you decide to do the weighting. Secondly, please recommend the statewide use of the Household Income Form to collect the information needed for the weighting, regardless of how the weights are calculated.

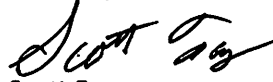
This work of determining the weighting formulation is so much more meaningful when students are receiving the nourishment they need to succeed at school. Since USDA's COVID waivers have been in place, our meal participation has increased by sixty-seven percent. That is very clearly telling us that more students are choosing school food. We know that when more students eat school meals, the meal service lines are normalized and the school lunch stigma is forced to give ground, and students are fed with a level of dignity that's eluded us up to this point. It's not just the identified students that are eating, it's literally the majority of students. We're seeing upwards of seventy-five to eighty percent of our students are eating school meals. It's been eighteen months of operating under these waivers and our program is visibly better with an easily identifiable improvement in the quality of service and ingredients.

We have been able to completely lean into a top-quality meal program and do away with a la carte sales like snacks and drinks that are available only to those students who have cash in hand or money in their account. Historically, districts have developed robust a la carte programs to raise revenues and balance the budget which, consequently, fuels the lunch stigma. Now, with Universal School Meals, we closed our snack bars and eliminated a la carte sales. We are finally able to focus our energy and resources on providing the best possible school meal program. We need more time to collect and analyze data but I don't think it's too far-fetched to say that a large portion of our sixty-seven percent increase is coming from identified students who are now choosing to eat at school simply because the stigma is in full retreat. The bottom line, with a level playing field, more students are receiving the nutrition they need so they are fed, focused, and ready to learn.

Once again, regardless of how you decide to do the weighting, please recommend the legislature to require Universal School Meals to level the playing field for students and bring dignity into our school cafeterias and, please, recommend the statewide use of the Household Income Form to collect the information needed for the weighting.

Thank you for listening, I really appreciate your time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Scott Fay". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "S" and a stylized "F".

Scott Fay

Essex Westford School District
School Nutrition Association of Vermont