

My name is Cassie Fraser, I am the Director of Marketing for The Abbey Group, a food service management company headquartered out of Sheldon, VT that feeds many of the schools across our state. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I am strongly encouraging the Task Force to recommend to the legislature a requirement for Universal School Meals in order to achieve equity among our students, regardless of pupil weighting. In addition to the recommendation of Universal School Meals, I also encourage the Task Force to recommend the adoption of statewide use of the Household Income Form to collect the information necessary to implement weighting, again regardless of the formulation.

I joined The Abbey Group during the onset of the pandemic and have seen how universal school meals have leveled the playing field for all students for the remainder of the 2020 school year, as well as the 2021-22 year. The big difference we are seeing this year is that many parents believe that they must fill out the Free and Reduced Meal Application for their children to be eligible for free meals, and due to the optional nature of that form, they do not complete it. This is where Vermont's children would highly benefit from the mandatory use of the Household Income Form to collect vital information. We could easily eliminate the currently optional, and frankly confusing, Free and Reduced form in favor of the Household Income Form so that all parents are not required to fill out any additional paperwork for all students to receive free meals and for the same purpose of data collection to be achieved.

We also have well established knowledge of the importance of consistent, high quality nutrition's impact on a child's ability to learn. When school's had to pivot to remote learning in the spring of 2020, food service teams, teachers, and support staff pitched in to keep all of our children's access to food constant because of its known importance. It is our responsibility to create the conditions necessary for learning and making sure that our kids aren't distracted by rumbling stomachs is paramount to doing so. The pandemic has strained our state's families, many lost their jobs while the price of food rose, and continues to rise due to supply and labor shortages. I see this as the opportune time for our great little state to move forward with Universal Free Meals in the coming school years regardless of the pupil weighting model so that there is no gap between free meals being available to all students. If the goal of this Task Force is truly to achieve equity in this realm, I and The Abbey Group believe that Universal School Meals are the key first step in creating it.

Again, I am imploring today that the Task Force recommend to our legislature the requirement of Universal School Meals in order to achieve equity among our students, regardless of pupil weighting. And again, regardless of weighting, I ask this Task Force to make the recommendation for the adoption of statewide use of the Household Income Form as the vehicle to collect necessary information for the implementation of pupil weighting.

Thank you all so much for your time and consideration.