

Pupil Weighing Task Force Public Hearing

October 29th, 2021

Thank you for taking my testimony.

My name is Karyl Kent, I am the School Nutrition Director for Lamoille North School District and past president of the School Nutrition Association of Vermont.

I am here to ask this Task Force to strongly recommend to the legislature to require Universal School Meals to eliminate stigma, and ensure that ALL students have equal access to school meals and the daily nutrition they need to be successful.

Please recommend the statewide use of the Household Income Form to collect the information needed for the weighting of pupils, however you decide to weigh them, Universal School Meals and Household Income Forms are our BEST tools to eliminate stigma, shame and hunger in schools, and to *inclusively* collect valuable financial data while feeding ALL kids.

We have been witnessing the clear benefits of Universal School Meals since the beginning of the pandemic.

Stigma – GONE, Anxiety – GONE, Shame - GONE

We have heard the responses from educators across the state. Universal School Meals creates equitable opportunities for learning. A universal Household Income Form gathers much needed data without imposing humiliation and shame on a segment of our families who are already doing their best to provide for their children.

Here is a statement from a teacher:

“...This year, in class, it has been amazing to have free meals for all students. Neither the children nor I have to worry about whether or not they are “supposed” to get food from school and whether their families will receive an unexpected bill if kids do take food. Just that one worry about getting a bill creates stress for students and it is very sad to see little kids feeling like they can’t eat because their parents tell them that they can’t afford it. Being able to offer breakfast and lunch to any child who wants it this year has alleviated that worry, has kept all children feeling full and ready to learn, and has leveled one playing field for kids. It’s no longer “low SES/free and reduced kids” and “others” when it comes to food. If they are hungry they eat without worry or stigma and that’s how it should be”.

And from another teacher Colchester

“... When everyone is provided with food free of charge, the stigma of having to eat school meals is erased. When students are able to speak up and be provided with food, I see them transform from being unfocused and anxious, to calm and confident while doing the things they need to do to become stronger learners. Every child deserves to eat. Universal school meals are not just about equality, or even the pandemic-- they are about justice.”

As School Nutrition Administrators, we know that the current meals application system is flawed and the potential for a more just and fair system is within our reach.

Thank you for your dedication to creating an equitable learning environment for all students and for recognizing that successful learning begins with Universal School Meals.

Karyl Kent, kkent@luhs18.org

Lamoille North SU, School Nutrition Director