

CONTACT:

Anore Horton
Executive Director, Hunger Free Vermont
ahorton@hungerfreevt.org, 802-231-1293

TO: Task Force on Universal School Lunch**DATE:** November 18, 2021**FROM:** Hunger Free Vermont, and
co-signers

Thank you for your request for comments regarding the task outlined in Act 67. We appreciate the work of this task force to help the legislature consider the best way to fund and implement universal school meals.

First, we would like to note that although the mandate of this Task Force is to focus on school lunch, we strongly encourage you to consider both breakfast and lunch in your report. As you know, the language for the Task Force was pulled from a bill (S.100) that would have mandated that universal school breakfast be provided to all students while this Task Force met to develop recommendations for how to pay for universal school lunch. However, S.100 did not make it through the legislative process in 2021, and just the Task Force piece was pulled into another bill, out of the context of the full S.100 bill. We understand that you must answer the question put forth in Act 67; however, we believe that nothing prohibits you from providing additional information. As such, our comments below contemplate funding both breakfast and lunch for all students.

Recommend funding sources for universal school lunch

We strongly recommend using the Education Fund, and specifically categorical aid. School Districts should get reimbursed for the difference between a “full reimbursement” at the free rate set by the USDA and whatever reimbursement they get for each meal served through federal and other state funds.

Suggested Language: From State funds appropriated to the Agency for this subdivision, the Agency shall reimburse each school district that made available school breakfast and lunch to students at no charge under subdivision 1264 (a)(1)(B) of this title for the cost of each meal actually provided in the district during the previous quarter to the extent that cost is not reimbursed through federal funds or other State funds.

We expect the Build Back Better Act to include changes to the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) which will mean that the total cost for Vermont will be significantly less than previously estimated.

We also recommend that Vermont take advantage of the “statewide CEP” option that is included in the Build Back Better Act, which will ease the administrative burden of implementing universal school meals on schools and AOE.

Recommendations for what data should be collected by local education agencies, school districts, and schools to qualify for federal funds based on student poverty, the means by which the data should be collected, the frequency of collection, and how this data should be reported to the Agency of Education and the frequency of this reporting

We recommend that all schools be required to use the Household Income Form and to collect it from all families. This form should be collected once/year for each student. We recommend calling it the “Household Information Form” in order to further decrease stigma associated with income data collection for families. The form should be designed using best practices and

should be available in both paper and online formats. The Task Force on the Implementation of Pupil Weighting has also had discussions about recommending such a form.

Specifically, we recommend language to this effect:

School districts will use the Household Information Form to collect data from families in order to identify economically deprived students for the purposes of identifying federal funds that may be available to the districts. The form shall be titled "Household Information Form" and each school district will collect information for every student, regardless of household income. The form will employ best practices, including being accessible for people with disabilities, being available online, using plain language, and offering choices for income questions rather than blank spaces. The form shall not require any attestation or indicate any potential consequences for inaccurate information. The form shall have a clear statement that it is to be filled out for every student and the information will be used to calculate educational funding allocated to school districts. The form shall not require a social security number for any student or household member. The form may include a section for the school to ask questions in order to provide the student/family with information about specific programs or services that they may qualify for. This section should be marked as optional and should clearly state what it is for.

The data should be submitted to the Agency of Education electronically by a date specified by the Agency and should be in a format that the Agency specifies.

NOTE: If the recommendation above to opt in to statewide CEP is put into practice, the statewide use of the Household Income Form makes even more sense, as no school will need to collect school meal applications.

Regarding how other states offer and fund universal school meals at no cost to students or their families

California. For the 2021-2022 school year, \$54 million from the California state budget will be used to supplement USDA funding for free school meals. California will invest \$650 million in ongoing funds by 2022-2023 to permanently continue offering two free meals per day to all public school students, regardless of income. Another \$150 million will be used to improve nutritional training and update school kitchen infrastructure.

Maine. Although Maine has enacted legislation requiring universal school meals for all Maine students, it has not yet fully funded the program.

No other states have enacted legislation requiring universal school meals.

Thank you -

Anore Horton, Hunger Free Vermont
Scott Fay, School Nutrition Association of Vermont
Matt Levin, Vermont Early Childhood Advocacy Alliance
Dan Fingas, Rights and Democracy
Tom Donahue, BROCC Community Action
Tawnya Kristen, Green Mountain United Way
Michelle Fay, Voices for Vermont's Children

Paul Dragon, Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity
Caroline Gordon, Rural Vermont
Karyl Kent, Lamoille North Supervisory Union
Megan Godfrey, Trinity Children's Center, Inc.
Christine Zachai, Forward Philanthropy
Molly Betournay, Clean Yield Asset Management
Grant John Gordon, Sheldon Methodist Food Shelf
Ed Sunday-Winters, Greensboro United Church of Christ
Jon Megas-Russell, Brattleboro Food Co-Op
Emily Landenberger, Middlebury Natural Foods Co-Op