



NATIONAL  
FARM to SCHOOL  
NETWORK

**Who's At the Table?**

VERMONT

**A Case Study of Act 151**

Creating a Virtuous Cycle With  
Farm to School and Universal Meals

April 2023

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## The School Meals Campaign: **Who's At the Table?**

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the urgency to move toward a more resilient local food supply that builds racial and social equity. The pandemic also radically shifted how child nutrition programs operate, with school nutrition professionals working tirelessly to feed kids under emergency conditions with limited resources. Even before the pandemic, school food was inaccessible for many students in need. While certain income-eligible students can receive free or reduced-price meals, many more families who do not qualify for this subsidy have difficulty affording full price meals.

**We need a system of school meals that serves all kids and values the people who get it to the table.** That's why National Farm to School Network advocates for universal meals focused on equity for the most impacted stakeholders across the food system. We created the ***Who's At The Table?*** School Meals campaign to provide tools to communicate how our shared community values have the potential to radically transform our food system for the better. This deep dive into Vermont's Act 151 policy is part of our effort to provide resources that support values-aligned universal meals advocacy. **[Learn more about this campaign and find additional resources here.](#)**

## About National Farm to School Network

The National Farm to School Network is an information, advocacy and networking hub for communities working to bring local food sourcing, school gardens, and food and agriculture education into schools and early care education settings. We provide vision, leadership and support at the local, state and national levels to connect and expand the farm to school movement, which has grown to reach approximately 67,300 schools in all 50 states as of 2019. Our network includes thousands of farm to school supporters, a national staff, an advisory board and partner organizations in all 50 states, Washington, D.C. and U.S. Territories. Our work is deeply rooted in equity, guided by our **Call to Action** that 100% of communities will hold power in a racially just food system.



# VERMONT

## Farm Fresh School Meals for All

# ACT 151: UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS ACT

In 2022, Vermont enacted a one-year universal school meals program that provides free breakfast and lunch to all public school students. This program includes students who attend independent schools on public tuition. Schools that participate in the universal meals program are required to maximize access to federal funds. Act 151 requires the Agency of Education to develop reports on the impact and status of this policy. It also requires the Joint Fiscal Office to prepare a report that examines possible revenue sources not ordinarily used for General Fund purposes.

In early 2023, Vermont introduced H 165, a similar bill to make universal school meals permanent in the state.

<b>INTRODUCED</b>	Feb 26, 2021
<b>ENACTED</b>	May 31, 2022
<b>BILL SPONSOR</b>	Senate Committee on Agriculture
<b>FISCAL NOTE</b>	<u>\$29 million for FY 2023</u>
<b>STUDENTS BENEFITING</b>	<u>80,692 (SY 2021-2022)</u>

## ADVOCACY STRATEGY

The Coalition adopted the Action Circles Model of Organizing, which fosters democratic and nonhierarchical decision-making, promotes solidarity, builds power, and aims to create long-lasting movements.

## KEY PARTNERS

The Coalition consisted of partners that have been working deeply and collaboratively on food system projects for more than a decade. Three organizations were the main drivers of the Coalition: **Hunger Free Vermont** (the Coalition Lead), the **School Nutrition Association (SNA) of Vermont**, and **Vermont FEED**, a farm to school partnership of Shelburne Farms and the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont. The Coalition partnered with a political strategy consulting firm, Action Circles, which started working alongside these organizations in 2016.

# UNIQUE POLICY FEATURES



## It's Temporary.

Act 151 is a temporary program with an explicit, written intention to adopt a permanent policy in the future. This intention can be seen in Section 8 of the bill, which states, “it is the intent of the General Assembly to use the data and information from the reports required in this act to identify the amount of and sources of potential long-term funding for universal school meals in Vermont.”

Introducing a temporary program was a tactical decision because it allowed hungry kids to receive meals for another year while providing evidence-based cost estimates of the program. Advocates viewed a temporary bill as more politically feasible, and it also gave the public more time to benefit from healthy school meals for all. This increased public support for universal meals, ultimately building momentum behind a permanent program. Now, the argument for the 2023 permanent universal meals bill is not framed as “pass this program”—instead, advocates are more focused on continuing a program that has proven to succeed. One challenge to a temporary policy is that it requires advocates to spend substantial additional time and resources to champion a permanent bill in 2023.



## It Requires Maximization of Federal Funding.

Act 151 requires all public schools to participate in federal meals programs. Additionally, it requires schools to “maximize federal funding,” which means that they are expected to take all necessary steps to obtain the maximum amount of funding available from federal sources. For example, if a school serves a high percentage of low-income students, they may be eligible for programs such as the Community Eligibility Provision, in which the federal government covers the cost of all school meals served by the district, regardless of whether a particular student qualifies for free or reduced-cost meals. Vermont mandates that schools apply for all federal programs they qualify for because additional federal revenue would reduce the overall cost of the state-funded program.



## It's Bipartisan.

This bill was introduced by the Senate Committee on Agriculture, a bipartisan committee, rather than sponsored by individual legislators.

# FARM TO SCHOOL AND UNIVERSAL MEALS: POLICY IN CONTEXT

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Advocates in Vermont have been working incrementally to eliminate student hunger for decades. Advocates also see universal meals as deeply interconnected with state farm to school initiatives.

In 2006, Vermont led the nation with the Rozo McLaughlin Farm to School Act of 2006, which established the state's Farm to School and Early Childhood Grant Program. Two years later, in 2008, the Vermont Legislature eliminated reduced-cost breakfasts. In 2013, the state became the first in the nation to abolish the reduced-price rate for both lunch and breakfast in schools. This means students who qualify for reduced-rate meals now receive them at no cost. The state's general fund continues to reimburse schools for the difference between the cost of free and reduced meals.

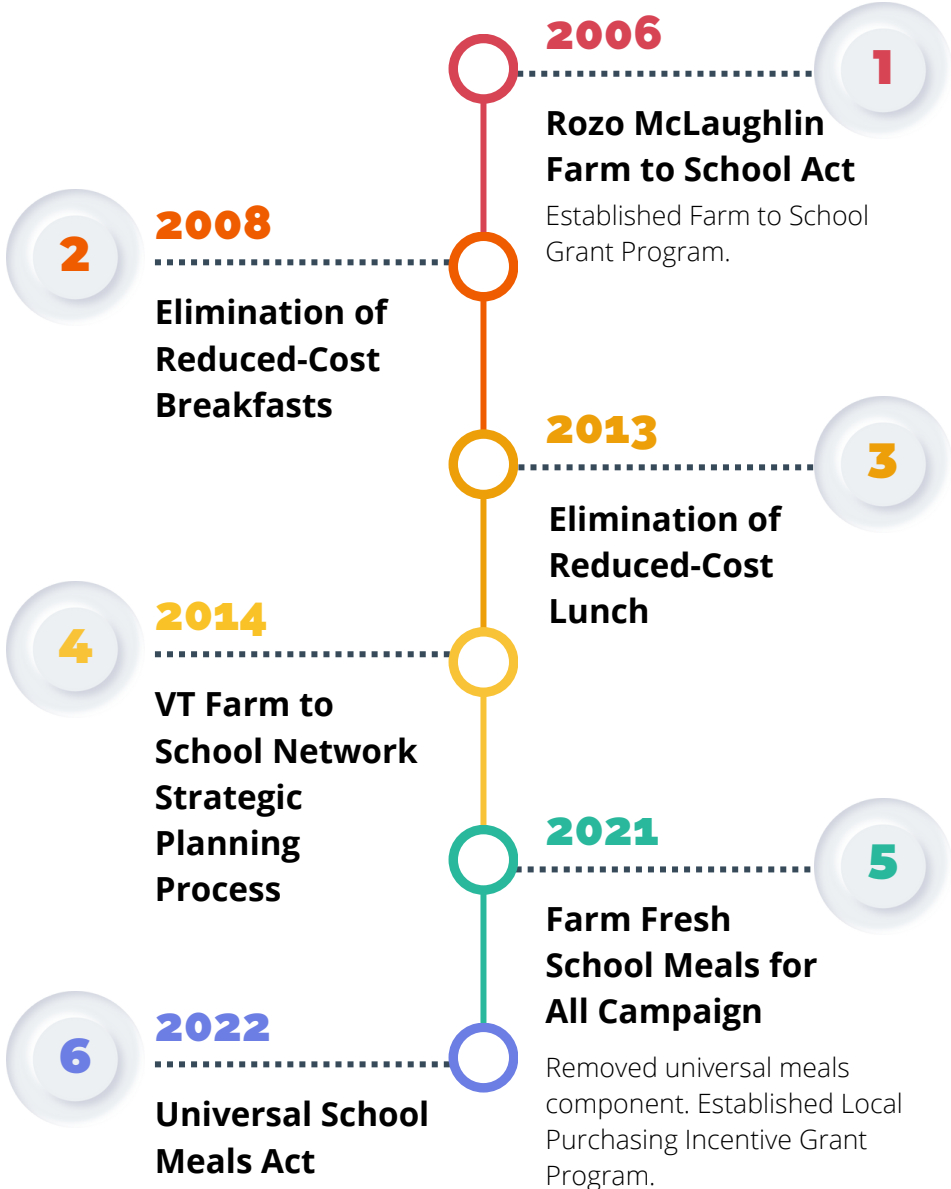
While a universal meals policy is a big leap from eliminating the reduced-cost meal copay, these legislative actions demonstrate the state's intent to be part of a conversation about their responsibility to eliminate childhood hunger. The groundwork laid during these early efforts still existed during Vermont's universal meals campaign, especially among senior senators, and was important to support Act 151.

In 2014, VT FEED, Hunger Free VT, VT SNA, and 40 other organizations and state agencies engaged in a strategic mapping project to understand the state's farm to school system. The VT Farm to School Network identified the programs, policies and people impacting farm to school and the levers they could use to best effect change. During the process, food access and equity were major considerations, leading the network to set a new goal of achieving universal meals. Since then, Network members have been actively working towards achieving this objective.

A universal meals policy was originally introduced as part of the Farm Fresh School Meals for All bill in 2021, which also contained the state's Local Purchasing Incentive Grant Program. However, the legislature separated the universal meals provision of this bill and passed the legislation (Act 67) in 2021. With both a grant and local purchasing incentive program already underway, the Coalition was able to build on these two "wins" and concentrate its efforts on universal meals in 2022.

# FARM TO SCHOOL AND UNIVERSAL MEALS: POLICY IN CONTEXT

## TIMELINE OF POLICY & ADVOCACY PROGRESS IN VERMONT:

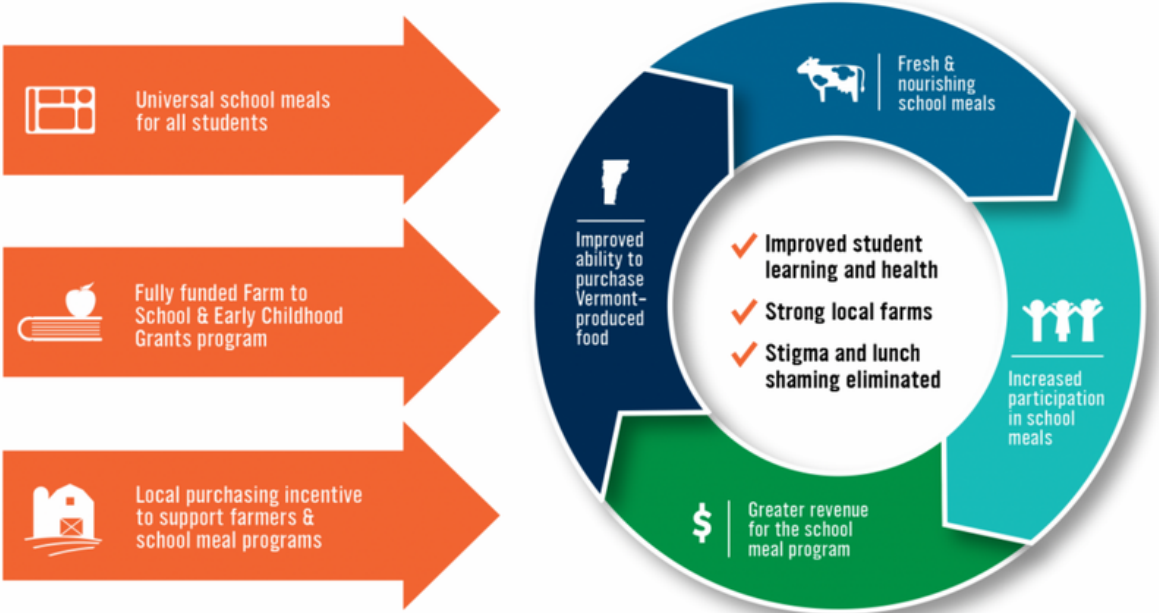


# FARM TO SCHOOL AND UNIVERSAL MEALS: CREATING THE VIRTUOUS CYCLE

Vermont has a rich history with farm to school. This movement, along with universal meals, has created what advocates in Vermont call a "Virtuous Cycle." By increasing participation in school meals, the program generates more revenue for schools, which in turn allows for more local purchasing, elevating the quality of meals overall. This improved quality, along with farm to school programming, increases participation and interest in school meals.

A universal meals program integrated with farm to school reaches beyond just students, as it also supports local producers, distributors, and families throughout the community. The strong connection between universal meals and rural economic development allows for a broader range of support from agricultural producers and more fiscally conservative residents.

This Virtuous Cycle also ensures that local food isn't just for wealthy schools and families that can afford it. It's a democratic way of feeding kids, eliminating stigma, and generating excitement. **This movement is not just about providing the freshest and most nutritious food, but also about making it accessible to all children.**



Graphic courtesy of VT-FEED



# TOP 10 TIPS FROM ADVOCATES

## 1. Hire dedicated professionals to support the Coalition.

- The Coalition secured funding to hire a campaign organizer employed by Hunger Free VT, who helped build grassroots support for this policy.
- Action Circles, a political strategy consulting firm, was critical to building the capacity of the Coalition (see next point).

"We took a lot of direction from Hunger Free Vermont. We [food service directors] were ready to do anything, but didn't know what to do... We wanted to be a part of it, but we needed direction. **It wasn't until Hunger Free VT was able to employ a campaign organizer position that we were ready to really make the strides we've made...** They're strategizing at their level, then putting us where we needed to be when we needed to be there. They didn't tell us what to say, but gave us the talking points. They tried to point out what conversations to avoid ahead of time. I think we all really appreciated that because we wanted to help."

-Scott Fay, Vermont SNA

## 2. Take time to build trust, capacity, and a shared vision among Coalition partners.

- At the beginning of this campaign, the Coalition built trust and created a shared vision **before** they engaged outwardly.
- The Coalition built campaign principles, established end goals, and identified policy attributes that they agreed they would not compromise. The group remained committed to the principles of *"every student, every meal, every day."*
- Coalition members engaged in capacity-building workshops. For example, storytelling workshops helped advocates share their experiences more effectively with target audiences.
- The core group of advocates had consistent, weekly calls with to ensure they were on the same page and aware of what was happening.
- Ultimately, the stability and strength of this Coalition allowed advocates to focus on grassroots organizing efforts.

# TOP 10 TIPS FROM ADVOCATES

## 3. Develop clear messaging.

- The Coalition established consistent and clear communication and developed talking points that were shared by all members, regardless of their organization.
- The Coalition ensured disciplined messaging in letters to the editor that were sent to newspapers across all Vermont districts. Find an example [here](#).

## 4. Incorporate local research into messaging efforts.

- The Coalition tracked local data (such as school participation in the Community Eligibility Provision and free and reduced lunch rates) for each legislative district. They used this data to customize messaging for legislators throughout the state.
- The Coalition used recent research by Hunger Free VT which demonstrated that schools participating in the Community Eligibility Provision had better student behavioral outcomes.
- It was challenging to coordinate directly with farmers during testimony, so the Coalition identified 100 farms that recently sold local food to schools and early childhood programs, which is a lot for Vermont. They gave each farm a lawn sign that said “This Farm Feeds Vermont Kids” which lined the road to the capitol with signs attached to Vermont farms that would benefit from a universal meals program.



(Above) Heartwood Farm of South Albany, VT. Credit: Maire Folan for Green Mountain Farm-to-School.

# TOP 10 TIPS FROM ADVOCATES

## 5. Utilize coalition partners' unique strengths.

- The Coalition integrated universal meals messaging into partner community and advocacy events to reach diverse audiences. For example, they incorporated universal meals messaging during Farm to School Awareness Day.
- The SNA was the main connection with students, teachers, and school nutrition professionals during this campaign because of their positionality in schools. Many of these school stakeholders shared compelling personal stories in support of universal meals.
- Coalition members actively made the connection between universal meals and local food purchasing. As a result of this framing, more residents in support of economic development and local agriculture also joined in support of universal meals.



(Above) The Paradee Family of Long Winter Farm (Stowe, VT). Photo Credit: Sarah Webb for the Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood Network.

## 6. Leverage outreach for research and future advocacy efforts.

- The Coalition gathered over 1,500 supporter cards across all legislative districts, which provided a significant database for future outreach.
- The SNA collected surveys to gather stories from students and teachers. The SNA used survey to find stakeholders with lived experience to give testimony during hearings.

# TOP 10 TIPS FROM ADVOCATES

## 7. Keep the focus on the youth.

- The Coalition kept the spotlight on the experiences and emotions of young people, particularly regarding issues of hunger. They ensured youth voices were represented and respected.
- The Coalition supported young people in giving testimony, including step-by-step guidance on crafting a testimony, early practice sessions, and being present in the room during their testimony.
- Find examples of youth testimony [here](#).

## Personal experiences can inspire advocacy and change.

During Farm to School Awareness Day, advocates invited legislators to a lunch event intended to celebrate local food in schools. The school hosting the event happened to offer free meals to all students because they participated in the [Community Eligibility Provision](#). One Senator was struck not only by the food and education, but also by the atmosphere in the lunchroom, which differed greatly from his memories of school meals. The lunchroom felt destigmatized, and the children seemed freer simply because they did not have to worry about what they would eat for lunch that day. This positive experience motivated the Senator to become a strong advocate for universal meals.

## 8. Provide multiple ways to advocate.

- The Coalition had two informal tiers of participation in the campaign. One was a steering committee level, and the other was a general sign-on level. Overall, there were over 100 organizations that signed on to support the effort. The Coalition sent regular communications to these supporters and provided a range of ways for them to advocate for the bill.
- The Coalition encouraged supporters to start small and work their way up to more public forms of advocacy, such as testifying before a committee.

# TOP 10 TIPS FROM ADVOCATES

## 9. Tips for testimony.



*(Left) While testifying, Ariana Matthews-Salzman shares fresh vegetables to Vermont legislators during a Farm to School & Early Childhood Awareness Day at the Vermont State House. Credit: Sarah Webb for the Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood Network.*

- Your testimony will be more authentic if you speak from your expertise and personal knowledge, rather than saying what you think others want to hear.
- It's okay to admit when you don't know the answer to a question.
- Begin with a clear ask, tell your story, and then end with the same ask. This helps ensure that your message is heard and understood.
- Have someone in the room with you to take notes during your testimony and provide follow-up if needed. This can be helpful in case you miss any important details or questions.
- Consider sending follow-up thank you notes after your testimony to provide additional information or clarify anything that may have been unclear during the conversation.

## 10. Find your legislative champions.

Representative Kate Webb, who resides at Shelburne Farms, a nonprofit that operates a working farm and offers educational programs for a sustainable future, served as a strong political ally. Representative Webb, who retired in 2023 after nearly 15 years in the VT House, utilized her significant political capital to lend support to the advocacy effort.

# LESSONS FROM ADVOCACY: WORKING THROUGH CHALLENGES

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## **Virtual tools increased participation in testimony.**

Advocates, especially food service directors, teachers, and students, faced difficulties attending hearings, which were typically on weekdays between 9-3 pm with short notice. Luckily, many advocates utilized virtual testimony to share their perspectives with policymakers. While the virtual option is more convenient, advocates believe that whenever possible, in-person testimony is still the most effective method to communicate their ideas.

## **Effective communication can help find common ground.**

Associations representing school boards, superintendents, and principals quickly opposed the bill. They viewed universal school meals as less pressing than other education needs such as infrastructure projects. These groups hold significant political influence, as they regularly testify to the Legislature on school-related issues. Despite this opposition, the Coalition engaged these groups through meetings, and both sides heard each other's concerns. The Coalition emphasized that food and nutrition are vital parts of the school day. After these meetings, the opposing groups stopped actively testifying against funding the bill.

## **Persistence and grassroots efforts can have a significant impact on policy change.**

Members of the Coalition had strong relationships with legislators. Over the years, one member had built a relationship with the House Chair of Education. Universal meals were always a topic of conversation between the Coalition member and this legislator. However, the legislator never saw universal meals as politically feasible. As time went on, this Coalition member continued to advocate for universal meals, and more and more constituents began to reach out to this legislator to discuss the value of universal meals. With perseverance and strategic communication, having the testimony of actual constituents brought this legislator from a place of hesitancy to a place of "Yes, I need to make this happen."

# EARLY IMPACTS FROM IMPLEMENTATION: INCREASED MEAL PARTICIPATION

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After several months of universal meals implementation, the Agency of Education released a report entitled **Impact And Implementation of the Universal School Meals Act**. The January 2023 report shared that statewide participation in both lunch and breakfast rose more than 10% when compared to 2019 rates. Based on early results, the Agency estimated that implementation may cost less than originally anticipated.

As of October 2022, school lunch participation saw a significant boost, with 60.6% (up from 50.5% in October 2019) of all qualifying students benefiting from the program. What's even more commendable is that the program has successfully eradicated the stigma associated with lunch, making it a welcoming and empowering experience for all students, irrespective of their socio-economic background.

**“I had a student the other day [tell me], ‘I think kids should have a safe place to go while they’re at school, and free meals makes the cafeteria much more welcoming for everybody.’ I think that we’ve killed the stigma around school meals because we normalized them... School meals are easier to get to. They’re better because we’re able to pay more attention to them and buy better ingredients. We have more resources.”**

- Scott Fay, VT SNA



*(Above) Educator Laura Butler purchases a CSA for her in-home early childhood program from local Blue Heron Farm. Credit: Sarah Webb for the Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood Network.*

# LESSONS FROM IMPLEMENTATION: WORKING THROUGH CHALLENGES

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## **Continue educating after implementation.**

The Vermont Agency of Education reported a slight decline in the completion of necessary income forms that would help schools maximize federal funding. To address this, the Agency of Education and Hunger Free VT conducted a "Fill the Form" campaign in the Fall of 2022. They provided schools with templates for letters, posters, and social media images. Vermont's approval for USDA's Medicaid Direct Certification pilot, along with USDA's intent to increase access for the Community Eligibility Provision, may reduce the cost of universal meals in future years.

## **Address logistical challenges that come with scaling up.**

Free meals for all increases meal participation. Schools should anticipate and address potential logistical challenges that may arise from scaling up meal service. These challenges include longer lunch lines and the need for more ingredients and staff. Investing in infrastructure like cold storage and scheduling more staff can ensure a smooth transition. Over time, schools will adjust to an increase in demand. Schools may be able to utilize any additional revenue and grant funding to scale-up their meal programs.



*(Above) Scott Fay speaks on a cafeteria panel during the 2022 Northeast Farm to School Institute Retreat at Shelburne Farms. Photo Credit: Sarah Webb for Vermont FEED.*



# STORIES FROM IMPLEMENTATION: INCREASED FINANCIAL STABILITY

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It is much easier for school food authorities to “break even” with lower administrative costs and higher student meal participation. With this additional funding for school nutrition programs, food service directors in Vermont are purchasing more local ingredients and building in for more staff time that is required for scratch cooking.

**“While we're not really making any more money, it's much easier to break even on a program when you have an increased volume. It's much easier to break even and set some money aside to repair equipment and replace equipment. Historically, before universal meals, districts, including this one, were losing money, and it was considered a “loss”, not an “investment.” Through this policy, the state is framing this as investing in children.”**

- Scott Fay, VT SNA



(Above) Photo by Sarah Webb for the Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood Network

# STORIES FROM IMPLEMENTATION: LESS ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

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**Implementing universal meals provides students with access to nutritious food and alleviates the administrative burden that comes with charging students for each meal. This benefits not only the students, but also the school nutrition program overall.**

For example, without universal meals, school food administrators spend a considerable amount of time calling parents to reclaim a student's accrued meal debt. This process can range from awkward to heartbreaking, and must be repeated regularly. Schools also require fewer staff to work cash registers. In one school district, 16-18 staff used to work on cash registers during a typical lunch. Under a universal meals policy, this district now requires only 11 staff on a cash register. The staff members that originally worked the register are now working in the kitchen to support scratch-cooking efforts. Universal meals are thus reinforcing Vermont's "Virtuous Cycle" narrative, transforming the system, and creating a more just, equitable, and resilient local food system.

**"Without universal meals, I have to run more cash registers, and I need people that are going to count money, and people are going to call families for money owed. But if we don't run registers [because of universal meals], and we have more kids eating lunch, I wouldn't necessarily stop employing those people who previously worked on register. Instead, I would place them in our kitchen preparing food, processing local food."**

- Scott Fay, VT SNA

*(Below) The Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood Network gathered on the shores of Lake Champlain at Shelburne Farms in 2022, home to the Institute for Sustainable Schools. Credit Sarah Webb for the Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood Network.*



# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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- [Action Circles website](#)
- [Hunger Free VT website](#)
- [Vermont FEED website](#)
- [Vermont Farm to School Network's Advocacy page](#)
- Legislative Report: *Impact And Implementation of The Universal School Meals Act by the Vermont Agency of Education* (Jan 2023)
- *Recommendations of the Universal School Meals Task Force by the Universal Meals Task Force* (Feb 2022)
- Memo: [Implementation of Act 151](#) by Vermont Agency of Education
- [2023 Report on Possible Revenue Sources for Universal School Meals](#) by Vermont Agency of Education

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