

# Vermont Public Health Association

## Policy Statement

### Universal School Meals

**Adopted August 2022**

**Updated and Readopted January 2025**

Providing breakfast and lunch to children attending school grades K-12 regardless of need or socioeconomic status.

**Description:** The American Public Health Association (APHA), the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and other public health entities have long emphasized the importance of healthy and nutritious meals for children and the effects that access to such resources can have on long-term education and health outcomes. According to the United Nations (UN), school health and nutrition interventions can promote growth, and combat childhood poverty, hunger, and malnutrition<sup>1</sup>. Research from the CDC holds that children who participate in school lunch programs consume overall healthier diets than those who do not<sup>2</sup>. School meal programs that include breakfast are associated with better attendance, fewer missed school days, and even better test scores<sup>2</sup>. The UN and WHO note that school meal programs may act as “springboards” for transforming countries’ food systems by incorporating locally grown food products and energizing local economies<sup>1</sup>.

According to the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), school lunch participation reduces food insecurity, improves dietary intake, and positively impacts health and obesity rates<sup>3</sup>. FRAC holds that meeting children’s nutritional needs leads to a better learning environment<sup>3</sup>. Providing school meals will give children the fuel they need to focus in school and produce better education outcomes statewide. By providing breakfast and lunch free of charge to all students regardless of need, universal school meal programs work to destigmatize socioeconomic status, fostering a better learning environment.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many states passed universal school meal programs that were backed by the Federal Government to ensure students had access to nutritious meals during the time of crisis. The educational, economic, and health benefits of Universal School Meal programs are optimally achieved when the program promotes high student participation and utilizes locally sourced food products for many years in succession. In June 2023, the Governor allowed a bill requiring universal free school meals to become a law in Vermont without his signature<sup>4</sup>. The Universal School Meals Act took effect on July 1<sup>st</sup> of 2023 and required public schools to provide free breakfast and lunch to students<sup>4</sup>. The estimated cost of this program is between \$20 million and \$31 million per year, resulting in a lasting positive impact on the Vermont population<sup>5</sup>

According to a report from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Center for Good Food Purchasing in 2021, school meal programs nationally are estimated to cost \$19 billion<sup>6</sup>. However, such programs are calculated to return approximately \$40 billion in health and economic savings<sup>6</sup>. Put more simply, every dollar invested in school meal programs has a return of two dollars in equitable health and economic benefits<sup>6</sup>. Taken in the context of a cost-benefit analysis, the Universal School Meal Act in Vermont, estimated to cost \$29 million for the 2024-2025 school year, could produce a net economic and health benefit of almost \$60 million in Vermont in one year alone<sup>5</sup>. The US Census Bureau estimates Vermont's population under the age of 18 to be 18.3%, or approximately 118,139<sup>7</sup>. Thus, implementing universal school meals will directly benefit nearly 120 thousand students in the short term and provide lasting economic and health benefits for years to come.

**Policy Statement:** The Vermont Public Health Association (VtPHA) supports the long-term provision of universal school meals to children in Vermont to promote healthy eating habits, proper nutrition, better educational outcomes, economic gain, and the health of the population.

**Supported Actions:**

Recognizing that historically underserved populations, such as people of color, are disproportionately of lower socioeconomic status, VtPHA supports the establishment of the recently passed long-term universal school meal program in Vermont as it will aid in providing resources to underserved populations and all children alike. By providing both breakfast and lunch to students in grades K-12<sup>th</sup>, this program will provide greater food security to the Vermont population. Many nonprofits in the state have outwardly supported legislation in this area including Hunger Free Vermont and Voices for Vermont's Children. VtPHA supports the establishment of this long-term program for universal school meals in Vermont that requires schools to collaborate with local farmers and food providers both to boost local economies and provide fresh, nutritious meals to students across the state.

VtPHA supports the following

*State Level:*

- Ensure funding for universal school meal programs
- Allocate resources equitably to school districts to provide school meals
- Use evidence-based research to support the argument for universal school meals
- Incorporate locally sourced food products into school meal programs to boost local economies and provide nutritionally healthy meals to students

*Local Municipalities:*

- Consider partnerships with local school districts and farmers to provide locally sourced food products for school meals
- Encourage student participation in school meal programs

## Related Policies:

- APHA Policy Statement 200712: Toward a Healthy Sustainable Food System
- APHA Policy Statement 20165: Addressing Social Determinants to Ensure On-Time Graduation
- APHA Policy Statement 202118: Preparing Public Schools in the United States for the Next Public Health Emergency: Lessons Learned from COVID-19
- APHA Policy Statement 20218: Call for Urgent Actions to Address Health Disparities in the U.S. Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic and Response
- APHA Policy Statement 7223: School Lunch and Breakfast Program
- APHA Policy Statement 8128: Support for Federally Sponsored Food Assistance Programs
- APHA Policy Statement 20072: Addressing Obesity and Health Disparities Through Federal Nutrition and Agricultural Policy

## Cited References:

1. World Health Organization. (2021, November 16). *UN Agencies Back Bold Plan to Ensure Every Child In Need Gets A Regular Healthy Meal In School By 2030*. Retrieved May 10, 2022, from <https://www.who.int/news/item/16-11-2021-un-agencies-back-bold-plan-to-ensure-every-child-in-need-gets-a-regular-healthy-meal-in-school-by-2030>
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021, June 21). *School Meals*. Retrieved May 10, 2022, from <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/npao/schoolmeals.htm>
3. Food Research and Action Center. (2017, March 17). *Benefits of School Lunch*. Retrieved May 10, 2022, from <https://frac.org/programs/national-school-lunch-program/benefits-school-lunch>
4. *H.165 (act 64)*. State House Dome. (n.d.). <https://legislature.vermont.gov/bill/status/2024/H.165>
5. Richter, J. (2023). *H.165 – an act relating to school food programs and universal ...* Vermont Legislative. [https://ljfo.vermont.gov/assets/Publications/2023-2024-As-Passed-the-General-Assembly/ae73d3b048/GENERAL-367958-v3-H\\_165\\_Fiscal\\_Note\\_AsPassedGA.pdf](https://ljfo.vermont.gov/assets/Publications/2023-2024-As-Passed-the-General-Assembly/ae73d3b048/GENERAL-367958-v3-H_165_Fiscal_Note_AsPassedGA.pdf)
6. The Rockefeller Foundation & Center for Good Food Purchasing. (2021, November). *True Cost of Food: Case Study*. The Rockefeller Foundation. <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/True-Cost-of-Food-School-Meals-Case-Study-Full-Report-Final.pdf>

7. U.S. Census Bureau (2021). *Vermont Quick Facts*. Retrieved From: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/VT/AGE295220#AGE295220>

**General References:**

1. Project Bread: Feed Kids, Solve Hunger. (2021, December 23). *It's Just Good Economics: The Case for School Meals for All*. ProjectBread.Org. Retrieved May 15, 2022, from <https://feedkidsma.org/news-updates/it-s-just-good-economics-the-case-for-school-meals-for-all>
2. Sorrells, A. (2022, March 29). *The Uncertain Future of School Meals for All*. EducationNC. Retrieved May 15, 2022, from <https://www.ednc.org/uncertain-future-school-meals-for-all/>