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DEVELOPING SOLIDARITY COALITIONS FOR UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS AND LOCAL FOOD IN THE UNITED STATES

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On a brisk winter morning, students and school staff from across Vermont donned their snow boots and coats, making their way to the state capitol. Inside, school nutrition professionals served locally grown apples and scratch-made parsnip muffins to legislators. Alongside a farmer who supplies much of the food on their lunch trays, students shared their stories about growing and tasting new foods. As a local high school teen ended his testimony, a legislator asked, “Really, what difference does this make to you?” The student paused, then said, “It makes me think what it took to get the food on my plate, and I don’t waste it. And when my mom was sick, I did the cooking in the house. And I started a garden at the mobile home park where I live.” The legislators went silent. This is our advocacy in action.

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, Vermont state legislators representing all three of the state’s major parties developed and championed the Farm Fresh School Meals for All bill—broad-reaching legislation that would establish and fund a holistic and equitable approach to feeding children in school. This bill would bring universal school meals to every public school in the state, fully fund the Farm to School and Early Childhood Network¹ and grants

program, and establish a new local food purchasing incentive program. A strong coalition of anti-hunger, school nutrition, farm-to-school, early childhood, and local food advocates and practitioners, who had been working toward this bill for over twenty years, celebrated and supported legislators as they used the coalition's carefully developed messaging, data, and stories to convince their colleagues to support the bill. We are some of the current leaders in this coalition: Anore Horton and Faye Mack lead advocacy work for Hunger Free Vermont; Betsy Rosenbluth works for Shelburne Farms and directs the farm-to-school program, Vermont Food Education Every Day (FEED); and Amy Shollenberger is the founder of Action Circles, a political strategy firm with a campaigning and organizing model of the same name.

Our school food transformation didn't happen by luck but through multiple strategies encompassed in a structured approach called the "Action Circles Model of Campaigning and Organizing." Our coalition is a network of partners from the advocacy, nonprofit, agriculture, and education sectors—united by our shared values and vision for robust, equitable school nutrition programs that welcome every student to eat at school and engage every school community in a local food and farm culture that nurtures children's health, cultivates viable farms, and builds vibrant communities.

We work in the state of Vermont, located in the northeastern region of the US, part of the unceded homelands of the Western Abenaki and Mohican peoples. Vermont is a small rural state with a population of just 643,000. About 25 percent of the state's population lives in Chittenden County where the state's largest city is located. The state is primarily white (94 percent), but the current generation of schoolchildren is 12 percent Black, Indigenous, and people of color—many of them the children of refugees and immigrants from around the world.² The state has a deep commitment to its culture of a "working landscape," which includes both agriculture and silviculture as well as a long history of dairy farming. Today, while the dairy industry's family farms struggle under economic pressures, there is a strong local food movement, and communities deeply value the working landscape and connections to the farming community.

At our coalition's core are three entities that don't traditionally work in lockstep across the country (and have sometimes viewed each other as adversaries): school nutrition professionals, anti-hunger advocates, and



15.1 Heartwood Farm of South Albany, VT, proudly displays a “This Farm Feeds Vermont Kids” lawn sign. Credit: Maire Folan for Green Mountain Farm to School.

farm-to-school practitioners. In Vermont, these groups each have separate statewide networks, supported by the School Nutrition Association of Vermont, Hunger Free Vermont, and Vermont FEED. The School Nutrition Association of Vermont is the Vermont chapter of the national trade association and advocacy membership organization that represents the school nutrition profession. Hunger Free Vermont is a statewide nonprofit organization working to end hunger through advocacy and legislation, technical assistance and outreach support of federal nutrition programs, and community engagement in anti-hunger efforts. Vermont FEED is a program partnership of two nonprofits, Shelburne Farms and the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT), that engages students with local food systems by connecting classrooms, cafeterias, communities, and local farms. However, in 2003 the School Nutrition Association of Vermont's Board created permanent positions for Vermont FEED and Hunger Free Vermont, creating a space for collaboration led by school nutrition professionals, while adding the capacity of paid farm-to-school and anti-hunger advocates.

Today, members of these Vermont organizations serve as strategic partners creating systemic change, sit on each other's Advisory Boards, and stand together in the movement toward universal school meals with a strong local food connection. This deep partnership did not happen overnight; partnership, trust, a shared vision, and—most importantly—solidarity were built over many years of intentional relationship building, transparent communication, and alignment.

Two grant opportunities from private funders from 2013 to 2018 helped to solidify the partnerships and shared policy goals. In 2012, the Vermont Community Foundation launched a five-year, \$5 million campaign to invest in both food access and the local food system, including farm-to-school. In 2013, The Vermont Farm to School and Early Childhood Network and the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets received grants from this fund for a strategic mapping process to diagram the people, policies, and programs that impact the Vermont farm-to-school system, and to identify the top strategic levers for system change to reach our goal. Through the process, the School Nutrition Association of Vermont, Hunger Free Vermont, and Vermont FEED, along with representatives of forty additional organizations and the Vermont

Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets, hashed out a shared goal for all partners that included universal school meals, increased local purchasing, and integrated food systems education. This shared goal reflected how each organization could achieve the change they sought individually, through collaboration and collective action.

The Community Foundation (followed by the Ben & Jerry's Foundation) catalyzed state and local partners coming together under this new integrated goal and made a critical investment in a systems change approach that resulted in shared goals and shared strategies for the partners under the Vermont Farm to School and Early Childhood Network. No longer driven by turf and competition for dollars, partners organized around key levers of change in the farm-to-school system, with a goal that included both ending child hunger in schools (universal school meals) and growing local food systems (farm-to-school programming). Instead of grants to each organization, funders gave the network money to allocate with a peer granting model toward strategies that would forward this shared goal. This approach cemented relationships and trust among partners. It contributed to an attitude of abundance instead of scarcity, even as funds dwindled. As policy had been identified as a key strategic lever for systems change, network funds supported a collaborative legislative agenda for universal school meals and expansion of farm-to-school funding.

Through incremental steps (table 15.1) and various campaigns (table 15.2), we built momentum toward the universal school meals legislation, introduced in 2020, and the comprehensive Farm Fresh School Meals for All bill in 2021.

When our coalition first started to work with Action Circles in 2016, we found that the model gave structure and language to many of the practices and tools we were already using and added to our toolbox. Since Action Circles came on board, our work has seen a tangible increase in both momentum and success. The Action Circles model is designed to build broad and deep leadership within a campaign, which translates to broader movement building. This is represented by the continued expansion of our solidarity coalition, which in 2019 grew to include Vermont-National Educational Association (VT-NEA), the state's largest educators' union. It also has tools to develop strong accountability structures, which help to build trust and solidarity among strategic partners, and it has tools to develop effective

Table 15.1 Incremental steps in providing universal free meals and local food to schools

Year	Universal free meals and farm-to-school milestones
2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Burlington School District (the largest in Vermont) becomes the first district in the state to serve universal free breakfast.
2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Several school districts unilaterally eliminate reduced-price meal fees, covering the cost through their own budgets.
2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Launch of Vermont Farm to School Network.
2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vermont Farm to School Network adopts an integrated goal of advancing both farm-to-school and universal free school meals in a “Virtuous Cycle.” Strategic messaging shifts from “free school meals” to “<i>universal</i> school meals” to emphasize the right to food and its fundamental role in education.
2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hunger Free Vermont assists thirty schools with providing universal free meals to seven thousand (8%) students using a federal provision (CEP) that allows higher-poverty schools to serve universal free school meals.
2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sixty-six schools serve universal free meals to 13,900 students (16% of students).
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seventy-seven schools serve universal free meals (over 20% of students). In a Vermont Department of Health survey, 87% of schools report that they purchase at least some food from a local producer. Over 50% saw an increase in school meal participation after launching a farm-to-school program.³
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More than thirty out of 150 legislators eat lunch or breakfast at a local school on a designated day, celebrating school nutrition.
2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 60% of Vermont school food authorities participated in the Local Purchasing Incentive Grants in the first two years. Over one hundred Vermont farms sell to K–12 schools and early childhood programs.

Note: Tables 15.1 and 15.2 were constructed using Hunger Free Vermont’s archives and interviews conducted in 2020 by Anore Horton with Kathy Alexander (past president of SNA-VT and currently the director of Mount Abraham Unified School District and Addison Northwest School District Food Service Cooperative), Doug Davis (past president of SNA-VT, past chair of National SNA’s Public Policy and Legislation Committee, and past director of the Burlington School Food Project, 1997–2022), Abbie Nelson (past director of Vermont FEED), and Marissa Parisi (past executive director of Hunger Free Vermont).

message campaigns that are not reactive but rather focus on the “happy ending” to the story we want to write.

LEAD WITH A HAPPY ENDING

One foundation of the Action Circles model is to articulate the vision of the “happy ending” an organization or coalition is working toward. Articulating a happy ending means that everyone involved knows what the end goal is and what it will look like to meet that goal; we will know when we are done. This articulation also allows the organizations and coalitions to invite varied groups into the work if they are committed to the “happy ending” and shared principles, which we will detail shortly.

Farm Fresh School Meals for All embodies the happy ending our coalition has been working toward for over twenty years. We have a clear vision: school nutrition programs as an integral part of our education system, universally available for all students, made from locally produced food that students are aware of and value and are prepared with skill by professionals who are well-compensated and respected for their crucial roles in children’s health and learning. The 2018 results of a Vermont Department of Health survey of all schools to evaluate progress toward the Farm to School and Early Childhood Network goal show that four out of five schools have at least some farm-to-school activity, and 87 percent of schools reported that they purchased at least some food from a local producer. Over 50 percent of schools saw an increase in school meal participation when a farm-to-school program was launched.⁴ School meals are wholesome, delicious, culturally responsive, and support children in building a positive connection to food, agriculture, and to their community. All children, regardless of their family income, are able—and *want* to—eat school food.

Another way we have long articulated and explained our vision is as a continuous “virtuous cycle.” If all we wanted to do was make sure children did not go hungry at school, we could push for universal school meals while ignoring the content of those meals. However, in our virtuous cycle, universal school meals, packed with locally grown produce, meat, and dairy that students have had hands-on experience with, sustains the farming economy of every Vermont town—where the school cafeteria is

almost always the largest communal gathering place and the largest “restaurant.” And the connection to those delicious, fresh, nourishing, local school meals make school cafeterias the cool place to eat, increasing student participation and bolstering school meal program finances. Kids get healthier and learn better, and schools draw down more funding to purchase even more local food—the virtuous cycle continues and expands, and the whole community benefits. Our research partnership in 2016 with the University of Vermont Department of Education showed that school food and learning are interconnected to further support coalition messaging.⁵

Our coalition understands how this happy ending helps fulfill key organizational commitments for each partner. The School Nutrition Association of Vermont, Hunger Free Vermont, and Vermont FEED have differing core missions: representing the interests of school nutrition professionals, permanently ending hunger, and engaging youth in building and promoting a resilient food system. Our happy ending links these missions together, is key to our success as partners, and drives our commitment to stay in solidarity with each other year after year. The organizations each know that one partner alone cannot change the school food system, and that the different policy, program, and funding pieces all work together to elevate school meals and make the cafeteria experience the best it can be for our students, school nutrition professionals, farmers, and communities. We have committed to working together toward our happy ending, sharing leadership on different incremental steps and priorities along the way.

The happy ending is also a key component of the accountability structure and of building effective strategy. When one of the coalition members suggests a strategy or when a legislator proposes an amendment or policy, we can ask—does it lead to the happy ending? If we cannot articulate how that strategy or policy proposal will lead to the ending we want, we know it is not one we can support.

The development and launch of the Universal School Meals Campaign was a monumental point in our work. It meant we could end the practice of “lunch shaming,” in which students with negative account balances (unpaid meal debt) are singled out in potentially embarrassing ways, and eliminate the stigma associated with free school meals for hundreds of thousands of Vermont children and their families. When our campaign

began in 2019 the concept of universal school meals was largely unknown to the general public. In January 2020, the Vermont Legislature became the first in the nation to introduce a universal school meals bill. Passing this legislation became more politically feasible after the COVID-19 pandemic, since most schools in Vermont and around the country served meals at no cost to all students during the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 school years, which dramatically increased public awareness of and support for universal free school meals.⁶

OVERVIEW OF THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

The Vermont legislature is a part-time citizen legislature made up of a 150-member House of Representatives and a thirty-member Senate. Legislators only receive a stipend and often hold full-time paid jobs. There are three major parties represented in the State House: Democrats, Republicans, and Progressives. Legislators have no staff and no private offices; the body prides itself on being open and available to the public. The legislature meets from January to May each year, with rare special sessions during other parts of the year. Bills are sponsored by legislators and are introduced in either the House or the Senate (called a chamber). Once introduced, a bill is then sent to a committee based on the bill's subject matter. The committee may then choose to pursue the bill, take testimony, discuss the bill's details, and recommend amendments to it. The committee will then vote on the bill and, if it passes, it may be sent to other committees based on its subject matter before ultimately being voted on by the full chamber. If the chambers come to an agreement, the bill passes the legislature and is sent to the governor, who can choose to sign it into law, allow it to become law without their signature, or veto it.

Vermont's legislature uses a legislative biennium—a two-year term of legislative activity. This means that if a bill is introduced in the first year of the biennium, the legislature has two legislative sessions in which to consider the bill before it must start over from the beginning. However, if a bill fails to pass during the two years of the biennium, it must be newly reintroduced and start from scratch.

To prepare for what we expected to be a four- or five-year legislative campaign, Hunger Free Vermont established a group of key stakeholders

to serve as the Universal School Meals Campaign Strategy Team. Many of the organizations and individuals at the table had worked together in various ways over many years, and some were brand new to the group. Our first step was to develop a set of shared principles for the campaign. The Action Circles model uses Shared Principles as a set of agreements that serve as a foundation for any decision-making throughout a campaign. It is the list of requirements that must be met, and cannot be compromised, in achieving the happy ending.

Shared Principles serve four important purposes. The process of developing the Shared Principles creates alignment and trust among the various individuals and organizations at the table. Tensions are surfaced and worked through at the start, rather than in the heat of a legislative session or intense negotiations with a short timeline. They also serve as a helpful reference tool when a new organization joins the effort; they must agree to the principles to join the coalition. Finally, they allow advocates and lobbyists to make decisions throughout the campaign quickly. We know that our coalition will not support any changes to legislation that violate our Shared Principles. So, advocates who are testifying or working closely with legislators can respond in the moment to proposed changes on behalf of the group. It also protects against the group splintering or having its members pitted against each other when legislators or other interest groups inevitably propose compromises. Shared Principles also act as a key component of our accountability structure. The group agreement is that no member will agree to anything that does not adhere to the principles. It is possible to change the principles if the situation changes, but if the exercise is done well at the beginning, the principles should withstand shifting situations.

We formalized a set of Shared Principles for Vermont's Universal School Meals Campaign in 2019. We have repeatedly experienced their power in action as when Vermont's Hunger Councils, representing over one thousand community leaders from every corner of the state, unanimously approve the universal school meals campaign. The boost in support for universal school meals did not translate to legislative action after the bill was introduced in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic slowed the bill's progress, and by the summer of 2020, it had completely transformed the way that meals were being served, along with how educators, state government, and

individuals across the state were talking about the importance of school meals.⁷

No one seemed quite sure how the pandemic and related economic recession would impact state budgets and property taxes—the primary source of education funding in Vermont. Many new residents moved to Vermont in 2020, including many families with school-aged children, potentially increasing the property tax pool. However, a record number of people in Vermont were struggling with hunger, and many people had lost jobs. Would there be a public appetite for increasing property taxes to pay for school meals? Were the school folks in our coalition still willing to push for greater public spending on school nutrition programs when the whole education system was in chaos?

Hunger Free Vermont pulled together the Universal School Meals Campaign Strategy Group to check in. We wanted to make sure that everyone still thought that moving forward with the Universal School Meals Campaign in 2021 was a good idea and to see if the pandemic had shifted anyone's perspective on key aspects of the bill, like how to pay for it. We were prepared for a challenging meeting with many perspectives. We didn't expect to fully come to an agreement in just one meeting. However, at the start of the meeting we revisited our Shared Principles:

1. We will work together to make two meals available to every Vermont public school student on every school day, with no direct charge to any student to get the meals.
2. Our campaign and the solution to get to universal school meals must be respectful, equitable, and systemic, so we will work together to ensure that:
 - a. School meals are accessible to every student—the goal is that all students participate in their school nutrition program.
 - b. No student or family will be shamed or singled out for any reason related to school meals.
 - c. The collection of income information from families will not be tied to school meals and will be collected from every family.
 - d. Meals will be established as part of a child's educational day.

3. To maintain high-quality school meals, we believe all schools should be in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program.
4. We believe the state revenue source for universal school meals should not be regressive and will not require a cut to other important programs.
5. We will work to ensure that the statewide solution to achieve universal school meals will not rely on corporate sponsorship or other forms of charitable contributions.
6. We believe and will work to ensure that universal school meals will enhance the local economy through increased local purchasing for school meals.
7. We believe that school nutrition professionals should be recognized and engaged as major contributors to the integration of universal school meals into the educational day.
8. We believe that the Vermont Agency of Education must be supported financially to ensure adequate capacity to achieve universal school meals in Vermont.

Going down the list, one by one, we collectively reaffirmed that these principles still fit and felt true. Guided by the principles, we unanimously agreed to keep moving forward with the campaign, and that it was more important than ever. No one suggested a single change to the bill.

The universal school meals bill was subsequently reintroduced in 2021, and by February, interest in the bill was picking up steam in the State House. We found that most legislators were with us in theory; they loved the idea of universal school meals and understood why it was important. They shared our happy ending. However, some were worried about the cost. One of the suggestions that we received from multiple legislators was to take an incremental approach. Vermont had already made school meals free for students whose household income falls below 185 percent of the federal poverty line, so why not go to 300 percent next? Our Shared Principles include equity and universality—creating a new economic indicator for who gets free meals and who doesn't is not equitable, does not further destigmatize eating school meals, and does not create a universal program. It was clear that the proposal violated our Shared Principles, and we were able to respond with confidence that it was not a path that our coalition could support. While it can be tempting in the moment to say "yes" to a legislative compromise that may guarantee a

“win” sooner, it was easy for us to say “no” because we had our Shared Principles to use as the foundation of our advocacy and decision-making.

Taking all the time we needed to bring a wide range of coalition members together to create and commit to a set of Shared Principles, and circling back to reconfirm them as the advocacy landscape shifts, has proven to be our most important practice for maintaining the trust of our important partners over the long haul of a major legislative campaign.

CURRENT STORY ANALYSIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF SHARED MESSAGING

The Action Circles Model uses story-based strategy as a theory of action. The coalition learned from this model that the way to develop an effective strategy is to change the public narrative about school food. We believe that all students can enjoy nourishing meals at school prepared by respected professionals and feel connected to that food while providing a consistent market for local farmers. Instead of focusing on the shortfalls and challenges of our current school food system, we ask, “What would it look like if school meal debt was eliminated? If cafeterias had the staffing and infrastructure needed to process locally grown ingredients into school breakfasts and lunches? If sharing communal meals in classrooms and cafeterias was a daily experience embraced by students, teachers, administrators, and staff? If students experienced how local food is grown and cooked? And if the people who run school meal programs were fully included in school districts’ decision-making because everyone understands that eating is elementary to education?”

We used Current Story Analysis to uncover the places where the current message frames and talking points about school food were not serving us. Then, we worked together to create new messages, effectively “rewriting the story” so that it would lead to the happy ending we wanted. After a few rounds of editing together, we agreed on four simple message frames: (1) universal school meals mean that every student can eat at school every day; (2) eating is elementary to education; (3) cafeterias can be inviting, simple, and satisfying spaces; and (4) no student should learn what hunger feels like at school. We further developed three to four talking points for each message frame, which we tested and trained people

to use.⁸ We practiced saying the talking points out loud and noted when they felt forced or unnatural. We also tried using them word for word when talking with family and friends in natural conversation (without telling them we were testing talking points) and captured their feedback.

We then used the messages in presentations to the community, in our public communications, in the media, when working with schools, and when talking with legislators. Our messages began to resonate and build across the state and in the State House. Legislators told our story to each other and to us, as though it was their own story that they had been telling for years. While the legislature was considering the Farm Fresh School Meals for All bill during the 2021 legislative session, our messaging about school meals and local food kept reappearing in news stories from journalists and in op-eds that we did not draft. School nutrition professionals, state agency staff, and others also used our solidarity coalition's language when testifying to the legislature.

As our school food stories were repeated, shared, and treated as more and more self-evident, the old and disempowering stories that challenged our "happy ending" and the assumptions that supported it started to disappear. By the 2021 legislative session, we were no longer being told that the quality of school meals was poor or that people didn't want their children eating them. Even more importantly, our emphasis on equity and collective responsibility—that "every student should have access to the same things while at school, whether it is educational opportunities or food"—was silencing what had been one of the most common objections to our vision: that individual parents ought to be responsible for feeding their own children and it was somehow immoral not to make them do it. The question became *when* Vermont would make the policy leap and begin providing universal free school meals instead of *if* it should do so.

ENGAGING PEOPLE CONTINUOUSLY AND THROUGHOUT THE COALITION

The Action Circles Model includes a variety of engagement levels. Individuals and organizations can move through circles based on whether they wish to contribute to, for example, higher-risk actions or leadership,

and depending on the stage of the campaign, their comfort with different kinds of activities, and what is going on in their own lives. This can include a wide variety of actions, such as serving school nutrition recipes in the State House cafeteria; bringing taste tests to committee hearings (farm-to-school snacks, of course!); children singing garden songs for the House devotional, and students sharing their personal stories.

Importantly, we encouraged leadership from school nutrition professionals and used coalition resources to amplify stories that prefigured the “happy ending” we were all working to achieve. Take, for example, Chris Parker, a professional chef turned school nutrition director who serves free school meals made with Vermont ingredients to all students in his district. He became a vocal Farm Fresh School Meals for All champion over the course of two years. As he deepened his engagement with the coalition, he regularly shared his story with the media and his school board. He also testified in the State House in support of increased investment in school nutrition programs statewide. We celebrated his success by helping him connect with local and regional media eager to tell a local good news story about the school district.

The Action Circles model works when the individuals and organizations leading the campaign are willing to share power with others and share ownership of the campaign and the issue. When we shared power and ownership, we made our campaign and our movement stronger. We saw this process play out over the years in the core coalition of Vermont FEED, Hunger Free Vermont, and the School Nutrition Association of Vermont. Natural turnover of staff and key school champions like students, teachers, and school nutrition professionals meant that high risk-takers and leaders of this effort changed many times over the years. This was especially true with the School Nutrition Association of Vermont, which does not have any paid staff. The board president is the public face of the organization, especially in the State House and in the media. This role transitions to a different person every year, with their own skills, style, and experiences. With intention, we successfully welcomed successive new board presidents into a leadership role in the advocacy effort while also maintaining space for the former board presidents to stay engaged at a high risk or leadership level. This proved to be very helpful because there were school nutrition

professionals across the state who engaged in advocacy and were comfortable speaking to the media, testifying, and calling up their legislators.

Vermont's part-time citizen legislature only meets five months of the year, so it's easy to lose momentum with the public and with supporters. Also, change can take time. We have been advocating for the state to fully invest in the Farm to School and Early Childhood Grant Program for many years. Through transparent and consistent communication and opportunities for engagement at all levels, the Farm to School and Early Childhood Network maintained strong support and a growing cadre of champions ready to act when needed. Engagement opportunities included signing a supporter card to be shared with their representatives, inviting supporters to low-stakes meetings with their representatives, sharing a post on social media or submitting a letter to the editor, or signing their organization or business on to a letter. It kept our core base of coalition members engaged when the legislature was not in session and ensured that supporters were not contacting their representatives for the first time when we had a big request to make.

BUILD A PLATFORM AND LET THEM STAND ON IT

The Action Circles model uses a strategy called “Build a Platform and Let them Stand on It.” We created a situation for policymakers and decision-makers to become the heroes of the story when they do what we are asking them to do. For example, we invited legislators to speak at our annual Farm to School and Early Childhood Awareness Day at the State House and during National Farm to School Month. Rather than ask our strongest champions to speak, we asked those who were supportive but not yet champions. By giving them a speaking platform with other leaders (and sometimes talking points), they developed into champions of the bill to be celebrated.

Because we are sharing power, the organizations within the coalition don't need “credit” for getting more funding or getting a bill passed. Thus, we could celebrate any policymaker who decided to champion our cause. As a result, we were able to develop champions of all parties and backgrounds, similar to how the coalition is made up of people who come to these issues from a variety of perspectives.

In 2015, the Vermont Farm to School and Early Childhood Network celebrated Farm to School month by inviting legislators to eat lunch at an elementary school in Burlington, Vermont's largest city.⁹ Two state senators saw firsthand the impact of farm-fresh free school meals for all. That day, students made kale pesto from their school garden and offered taste tests in the cafeteria. Nearly all the students chose to eat school lunches made with produce from Vermont's abundant fall harvest. As the senators were leaving the school, they talked about how surprised they were that students were eating the healthy foods and how excited they were by the positive culture in the lunchroom. The experience inspired them to ask where to direct state funds so that all Vermont cafeterias could become such inviting and positive places. That moment led to the legislature funding a pilot program to help schools launch universal meal programs through the state's Farm to School Grant Program, the first state-level investment in universal school meals in the US.

Universal school meals remain integrated into the Vermont's Farm to School Grant Program and the work of the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets. The pilot program proved that schools with universal meal programs were able to purchase significantly more local food. Still to this day, these state senators tell the story of the 2015 school lunch visit and the pilot program it inspired.

This speaks to the power of personal connection with legislators and other government officials. In our advocacy work, we approached these powerful stakeholders as individual human beings with a variety of pressures on them at any given time. For example, the Vermont state director of child nutrition programs had valid concerns about how to support hundreds of schools navigating the complex transition to universal school meals without more staff. We recognized her as the leader of an overworked team without capacity to fully respond to school districts' requests for technical assistance. As the director of a department housed within the Vermont Agency of Education, she was also responsible for communicating the agency's main concern to the legislature: that without the incentive of free school meals, parents and guardians would refuse to provide the income data currently collected in school meal applications, which is widely used in the US as a proxy for poverty to determine federal funding for school food.

Yet we also recognized her steadfast commitment to making sure students have access to food in school. Through listening, asking questions, and honoring her position within the structure of state government, we found ways to not only address her concerns but to champion her department's need for an additional full-time position in the bill. We worked hard to get this new position passed, even though the universal school meals legislation didn't pass in 2021. Midway through the 2021 legislative session, her comments on the bill became less oppositional with more reference to "what the advocates would say." By the 2023 legislative session, the Agency of Education was providing data and testimony that aided passage of the bill.

We also found it important to take the time to authentically celebrate successes large and small and to thank everyone involved. For example, in 2013, the Vermont legislature passed a bill that eliminated the reduced-price category for school lunch, making Vermont the first state in the nation to eliminate the reduced-price meal category. The bill signing marked a major milestone five years in the making. Rather than jump right into another campaign, we spent a year thanking legislators, celebrating, and sharing the impact that their work was having across the state. We made sure that legislators had the experience of knowing that their work was making a difference in the lives of their constituents and that they were appreciated for it.

BUILDING ON SUCCESS

Over the course of our coalition's twenty years of working together, we have continued to act from hope rather than from fear. We lead with a happy ending that is solutions focused. This has enabled us to make significant strides at the state level (see table 15.2) and helped strengthen a national movement that leverages the work of our solidarity coalition.

After our 2013 victory eliminating all reduced-price meal fees, we shared our strategies, campaign documents, and research at national conferences and with partners across the country. By 2021, seven additional states¹⁰ had followed Vermont's lead by eliminating all reduced-price school meal fees. In the last two years, more states have taken this action, or jumped past it to fund universal free school meals. As of April 1, 2023, legislatures

Table 15.2 Summary of legislative campaign and state budget allocations

Year	Legislative activity and state budget allocations
2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch of legislative campaign to eliminate the reduced-price breakfast fee.
2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vermont becomes the first state to create a Farm to School Grants Program.
2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statewide elimination of the 30-cent reduced-price breakfast fee.
2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch of statewide campaign to eliminate the reduced-price lunch fee.
2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vermont becomes the first state to eliminate all reduced-price meal fees.
2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch of campaign to increase Farm to School Grants Program funding. • Legislature increases funding for Farm to School Grants Program and includes a pilot project to help barely CEP-eligible schools provide universal school meals (the first state-level appropriation for universal school meals in the US) while increasing their local food purchasing.
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State funding increases for the Farm to School Grants Program for the third year in a row and expands to support early childhood programs.
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partners develop the Universal School Meals Campaign principles, message frames, and strategy. • Senator Debbie Ingram agrees to sponsor the universal school meals bill.
2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universal School Meals legislative campaign officially launches in January. • Introduction of Local Purchasing Incentive bill in both the Senate and House. • COVID-19 pandemic upends Vermont's legislative session.
2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New legislative champions introduce universal school meals and local food purchasing incentive bills. Led by longtime school meals champion, Senator Robert Starr, the Senate Agriculture Committee combines both efforts into S.100, the Farm Fresh School Meals for All bill. • Legislature passes Local Purchasing Incentive Grant Program. • Universal school meals passes the Senate but the session ends before the House passes the bill.
2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universal school meals bill passes for 2022–2023 school year with a mandate to report back on financing options during the following legislative session. • Farm to School and Early Childhood Grants funded at \$500,000.
2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H.165, a bill to make Universal School Meals permanent in Vermont and provide dedicated permanent funding, was passed with overwhelming tri-partisan support and signed by the governor.

in thirty (out of fifty) states and the District of Columbia were considering—or have already enacted—permanent universal free school meals.¹¹

The COVID-19 pandemic contributed significantly to creating this policy window for universal free school meals (see chapter 7, this volume). However, by pursuing an integrated goal of advancing both farm-to-school and universal free school meals in a “Virtuous Cycle,” our solidarity coalition has helped foster a national movement for “values-aligned universal school meals.”¹² According to the National Farm to School Network, as of December 2022, 79 percent of states that had introduced universal school meals legislation had also enacted at least one local food purchasing policy.¹³

At the national level, our ongoing work and the strong relationship we have built with Vermont’s congressional delegation led to the introduction by US Senator Bernie Sanders (Independent, Vermont) of the national universal school meals bill in 2019—a bill our coalition partners helped draft—and to its regular reintroduction since then. From our perspective, state anti-hunger, school nutrition, and farm-to-school advocates have forged a powerful national movement that eventually will make a federal universal school meals program inevitable.

NOTES

1. This network was created in 2008 to coordinate efforts to engage PK–12 students and school communities in a local food and farm culture that nurtures children’s health, cultivates viable farms, and builds vibrant communities.
2. U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census 2020, PL 94–171, Table P1, Vermont, <https://data.census.gov/table?g=040XX00US50&tid=DECENNIALPL2020.P1>; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count Data Center, “Vermont,” accessed April 23, 2023, <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data?location=VT#VT/2/0/char/0>.
3. Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood Network, “2018 Vermont Integrated Food, Farm, and Nutrition Programming Data Harvest” (Vermont Department of Health, October 2018), <https://vermontfarmtoschool.org/resources/2018-vermont-integrated-food-farm-and-nutrition-programming-data-harvest>.
4. Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood Network, “2018 Vermont Integrated Food, Farm, and Nutrition.”
5. Josiah Taylor, Bernice Garnett, M. Anore Horton, and Ginger Farineau, “Universal Free School Meal Programs in Vermont Show Multi-domain Benefits,” *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition* 15, no. 6 (2020): 753–766, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2020.1727807>.
6. See chapter 7, this volume.

7. See chapter 7, this volume.
8. To see this campaign artifact, see Hunger Free Vermont, “Key Messages,” Universal School Meals Vermont, last updated January 2020, <https://www.universalschoolmealsvt.org/messaging-frames>.
9. For more information on Burlington’s School Food Project, see Doug Davis, Dana Hudson, and members of the Burlington School Food Project, “Going Local: Burlington, Vermont’s Farm-to-School Program,” in *School Food Politics*, ed. Sarah A. Robert and Marcus Weaver-Hightower (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 162–182.
10. Colorado, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, and Oregon. New Hampshire, North Carolina, and North Dakota cover the reduced-price co-pays for breakfast only. Washington, DC, covers the cost of reduced-price lunch, along with universal breakfast. Washington covers reduced-price breakfast co-pays for all students and reduced-price lunch co-pays for students in grades K–3. Data provided by the Food Research & Action Center. (Data for 2021).
11. Permanent universal school meals have been enacted by the state legislatures in California, Maine, Minnesota, and New Mexico, and by ballot initiative in Colorado. Temporary universal school meal programs are currently in place in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Vermont.
12. The National Farm to School Network is the largest nonprofit organization in the US working to advance farm-to-school programs in K–12 and early child education settings. It advocates for values-aligned school meals built on six shared community values: economic justice, environmental justice, health impact, prioritizing racial equity, respecting workers and educators, and animal welfare. See National Farm to School Network, “Our Values,” June 2021, https://assets.website-files.com/5b88339c86d6045260c7ad87/613797bd05726e5c091c5280_OurValues.pdf.
13. National Farm to School Network, “State Universal Meals Policies Can Strengthen A Just and Resilient Local Food System,” December 2022, updated April 2023, [https://assets.website-files.com/5c469df2395cd53c3d913b2d/642b2bc519f5a1184e10255f_Universal%20Meals%20Policies%20can%20Strengthen%20a%20Just%20and%20Resilient%20Local%20Food%20System%20\(3\).pdf](https://assets.website-files.com/5c469df2395cd53c3d913b2d/642b2bc519f5a1184e10255f_Universal%20Meals%20Policies%20can%20Strengthen%20a%20Just%20and%20Resilient%20Local%20Food%20System%20(3).pdf).

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