

**Testimony of Shane Goettle  
on behalf of Solving Hunger, Tusk Philanthropies**

**Chairman Ron Sorvaag  
North Dakota Senate on Appropriations Education and Environment Division  
March 10, 2025**

**HB 1013**

Chairman Sorvaag and members of the Senate Appropriations Education and Environment Committee, my name is Shane Goettle and today I am presenting testimony for *Solving Hunger*, a project of Tusk Philanthropies, that is dedicated to ending child hunger.

*Solving Hunger* is working in North Dakota because of our state's decision to expand school meals last session, and its interest this year in doing more, as indicated by what the House has done in HB 1013 you have before you.

*Solving Hunger* has been involved with this work for nearly ten years, in 27 states. In addition to North Dakota, the organization is working this year in Arkansas, Ohio, and Kansas, among others. Last year, they helped expand school meals in South Carolina, where over 85% of kids there are now being fed for free.

Universal school meals are a proven solution to child hunger. In states that have implemented free school meals for every child, kids are healthier, attendance in school improves, test scores rise, graduation rates increase, and kids are happier since they no longer face stigma. Their parents are saving around \$1,000 per child per school year, which also makes school meals an answer to the affordability issues that families face today.

While **universal** school meals is one way to address child hunger, simply **expanding** school meals is a step in the right direction, and it can be accomplished in a variety of ways.

*Solving Hunger* applauds what the state of North Dakota has already done to expand meals to families living at 200% of the federal poverty level. The House's proposal this year to expand that further – to 225% – at a cost of an additional \$4.5 million, is another welcome solution that is worthy of the Senate's attention.

Solving Hunger is also supportive of language in the ESA bill that is being considered in this body that would allow parents to direct their educational funds, at their discretion, to school meal programs. Either approach impacts kids who are in need of better and reliable nourishment. And either approach allows North Dakota education tax dollars to work with greater efficiency. No matter the investment, hungry kids can't learn.

Because Solving Hunger works to pass laws to expand school meals throughout the country, it might help members of this committee to have additional information that could provide context as you consider what's best for North Dakota children – and what's affordable for its taxpayers.

First, there is another expansion approach being used by states that also has the benefit of being universal: guaranteed **breakfast** for every child. This approach not only removes the stigma out of one meal, but breakfast typically costs 20%-25% of the cost of full breakfast and lunch. It is a solid “stepping stone” to universal school meals. Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders of Arkansas just signed a universal breakfast bill in her state three weeks ago. All 475,000 Arkansas school children will begin receiving free breakfast at school in the fall, at a cost of \$14.7 million annually.

Second, if the committee was interested in funding both breakfast and lunch, we hope that Senators might consider the possibility that current estimates of \$70 million per year is a much higher estimate than what the actual costs are in states with comparable K-12 census'. Smaller states might have particular challenges concerning economies of scale that aren't faced by bigger states, but consider the following states – both with similar populations – who are both providing universal school meals:

- Maine has 50% more K-12 students than North Dakota, and a child poverty rate that is 3.5 points higher than here. To feed far more children, it costs Maine \$64 million annually.
- Vermont has a comparable child poverty rate, and 40% fewer K-12 students. The cost to Vermont is \$24 million annually.

In other words, using census data and actual costs in those states, those comparable population states are paying between \$287-372 per year to feed each child breakfast and lunch. Based on estimates here of \$70 million annually, it would cost \$592 per year to feed each child breakfast and lunch. This is way outside of the norm in other states, and we would encourage another look at estimates that the committee has been provided. Even if North Dakota spent as much as Maine – the highest in the country – to do universal meals, that would equate to \$44 million, not \$70 million. If free breakfast in North Dakota tracked with costs in Arkansas that would be equivalent to just under \$4 million in North Dakota.

Whatever approach you choose, *Solving Hunger* can assure you that it will be popular. The philanthropy regularly polls the popularity of school meals, and receives consistent results: feeding kids is enormously popular across states, no matter size, urban/rural characteristics of a state, or political differences. In poll after poll across the nation, red states and blue, more than 80% of voters want to make sure kids don't go hungry. And the best way to do that is by making sure they eat at school.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to testify, and thank you for your work on behalf of North Dakota's children.