

House Bill 1413

Chairman Owens and Vice Chair Schreiber Beck and members of the House Education Committee. For the record, I am Representative LaurieBeth Hager from District 21 in the downtown or central part of Fargo. Within my district are 3 elementary schools, Madison, Jefferson and Hawthorne and there are middle students attending either Carl Ben Eielson or Ben Franklin Middle School with high school students attending either Fargo North or South High School. I am here today to present HB 1413, a bill to provide no cost school nutritional resources to ALL students attending Public Schools in our state of North Dakota and to use moneys from the state's Legacy Funds to finance this program.

I will have several people testifying regarding the origins of this proposal, the need for this program, statistics on hunger and food insecurity of our school children, and economic issues facing families and a few members of a Family Advocacy group.

I think each of us knows that if we are hungry or tired it is difficult to concentrate and therefore it is difficult to learn or even participate in classroom activities. Furthermore, my counseling background and experience as a mother, leads me to conclude that many classroom incidents or behavioral issues can be attributed to hunger/food insecurity. However, I am not certain that teachers or administrators currently directly track that information. My most valued counseling concept is Maslow's Pyramid. Briefly if one's basic needs at the bottom of the pyramid (food and shelter, security) are not met the higher levels (learning, belonging and self actualization) will not be achieved. In the US, 15.2 percent of children are food insecure. What if a simple solution to enhance learning and prevent behavioral issues during the school day is to alleviate hunger and food insecurity.

The United States', The National School Lunch Program was initiated in 1946 by President Truman after finding during WWII many men were unable to enlist in the military because of long term effects of childhood malnutrition. In 1966 Pres. Johnson extended the program to providing students with breakfast. By 1975 breakfast was offered to all children because many students had 2 working parents. During the 2020, COVID Crisis, CARES ACT funds have been utilized to provide free school lunches to ALL public school students.

For much more recent background information, Fargo Public School had initiated a student debt policy that sent delinquent accounts to collection agencies. This brought awareness to the issue that families were unable to afford school lunches for their children. Several advocacy groups across the state including the Lunch Aid group of musicians in Fargo, a group headed by 2 Female Hockey Gold Medal Olympians in Grand Forks and a motorcycle group in Minot and in Bismarck a group of artists raised funds to pay off student lunch debt. Student Lunch debt is not merely an issue in the larger cities of the state, I am certain that in our rural schools, teachers or others have kicked in to assist students/ families struggling with lunch debt.

Another issue has been deemed "lunch debt shaming" when a child's lunch money account is depleted a child would get a hand stamp or be offered a different lunch perhaps merely a sandwich or fruit rather than a hot lunch. Several states have created policy to eliminate such shaming. This bill would also eliminate economic shaming because ALL students would be provided with a no cost meal. Two of the Elementary schools in my district Madison and Jefferson were designated as Community Eligibility Provision Schools in 2019 which provides that ALL students attending to receive lunch and breakfast at no cost. This is for schools at the nation's highest poverty levels.

as because over 80% of the students in the school were eligible for Free or Reduced Student Lunches.

While the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program is available to lower the costs of school lunch or school breakfast for economically disadvantaged families. According to the 2020 income guidelines for free and reduced lunch are calculated at 130% and 185% of the poverty level. Households with an income of \$33,475 for a family of 4 would receive a free meal and households income of \$47,638 would receive a reduced a meal at a reduced fee. For perspective, a person earning the state and federal minimum wage of \$7.25 has a yearly income of \$15,080. A person earning \$10.00 an hour has an annual income of \$20,800. And \$31,000 would be the annual income for a person earning \$15 per hour. These families would therefore qualify for free and reduced lunches if they had 2 school children. However there a gap exists where families do not qualify or families who do not apply or complete the lengthy paperwork.

The Fiscal note for HB 1413 indicates \$98 Million for the biennium to provide school meals to the 112,000 students attending North Dakota public schools. House Bill 1413 would not duplicate the FFRLP, moneys from FFRLP would offset the state's cost to the Legacy Fund.

I believe North Dakota's most essential legacy is our children and their education is our future. Therefore, let us use the Legacy Fund to invest in the children and families in our great state as per the wishes of our citizens when the Legacy Fund was created by a vote of the citizens in 2010.

I thank the committee for your consideration of House Bill 1413 and I stand for questions.