

HB 1413

North Dakota Senate Committee on Education

Chairman Schaible, Vice Chairman Elkin and members of the Senate Education Committee:

My name is Ben Tucker. I am a farmer from St. Thomas, North Dakota in Pembina County. I represent no one except myself. I come before you today in support of HB 1413.

I am a grandfather. I love my grandchildren very much.

A couple years ago, my granddaughter came home from her Grand Forks elementary school with a stamp on her hand informing my daughter that they were behind on the Hot Lunch bill. The cafeteria staff calls this The Stamp Of Shame.

Fortunately, Ella (my granddaughter) was too young to be embarrassed by The Stamp Of Shame. Her classmates were still too young to tease her about the stamp. Ella thought the stamp was cool.

I did not think the stamp was cool. My daughter makes a good living and had just forgotten about the lunch bill; much as I used to do when my kids were in school. Back then, in my small town, I just got a call from the school office.

I was mad at Grand Forks. I was mad because no child should be embarrassed in front of their classmates. It wasn't just my granddaughter. No child is responsible for paying bills. No child is responsible for filling out Free And Reduced paperwork. It is never the child's fault. Ever. Yet it is the child that faces ridicule and embarrassment.

I was so mad that I went to a few Grand Forks School Board meetings and got them to reconsider using The Stamp Of Shame in their elementary schools. Since then, I've continued to keep up with the issue.

I've learned that lots of schools have high school kids who skip lunch rather than risk getting a peanut butter sandwich with a glass of water in front of their peers. I've learned that schools no longer use peanut butter and have gone to soy-butter. I've learned that some high school students from poor families always skip lunch because they don't want another bill coming to the house and never tell their parents. I've learned from school administrators that unpaid lunch bills would be a minor problem if they could just get everyone to fill out the Free And Reduced paperwork. I've learned that cafeteria staff hates stamping a child or not feeding a child. I've learned that some schools will dump a full tray of food into a large garbage can right in front of the child rather than feed a kid whose parents are behind on the lunch bill. And make no mistake...it's the parents who are behind on the bill and not the child because children aren't responsible for paying bills.

I've also learned that hungry students don't learn very well, but that was never my motivation. My motivation has always been treating children well because it's not their fault.

What I haven't learned is the best way to deal with this problem. It is a problem. If you want a child to hate school forever, just embarrass them in front of their peers.

House Bill 1413 began as an ambitious bill to simply feed all of the school children. Period. Because it came with a very large fiscal note in times of tight budgets, it would have been easy for the House Education Committee to stamp it Do NOT Pass and easy for the House to kill it. That, however, did not happen.

The House Education Committee saw that problems exist. They realized that we can do better. There must be ways to feed hungry school children. There must be ways to avoid making children hate school, some of whom desperately need education as a path to a better life. Yet the question remains: What is the best path forward?

I do not know the answer to that question, but I do know that the key word is "forward". We, as a state, need to study this problem. Maybe the best answers are small and simple like figuring out a way to get the paperwork filled out or to expand the Free And Reduced program. Maybe the answer is to just feed every child. Maybe the best answers are already being implemented in other states.

We don't even know the scope of the problem. My wife teaches 4th grade and I can tell you that she used to have students missing lunch every single year so it's not a small problem. She doesn't anymore because, since our granddaughter got that stamp, we pay every delinquent lunch bill in her class. Kris is a great 4th grade teacher and I will not tolerate one her students have what should be a great year of learning ruined by some stupid hand stamp or an embarrassing soy-butter sandwich.

Members of the Senate Committee on Education, HB 1413 is not a call to action. It is merely a step forward to see the scope of the problem and give you options to improve our state's education program. The only logical reason to vote Do Not Pass is that you don't believe that there is a problem. I stand before you as a witness and my testimony is that we do have a problem. I got up early and put on a suit and drove a long way to tell you that in person. I have a long drive home facing me, but I would be glad to answer any questions.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for your time, your attentiveness and your public service.



Bennet B. Tucker

St. Thomas ND

3/8/2021