

Good afternoon, Chairman Heinert and members of the House Education Committee. My name is Elizabeth Pihlaja and I am the Operations Director of the Foundation for a Healthy North Dakota. I am providing written testimony on behalf of the Foundation in support of HB 1491.

This bill would allocate general fund dollars to schools in order to defray the expenses of providing free lunches to children who attend public schools in North Dakota.

The Foundation for a Healthy North Dakota believes that no child should go hungry because an adult in their life cannot afford school meals. While there are federal programs to cover or offset parents' school meal costs, there are many families that do not qualify for assistance but still struggle with these expenses – especially with rising food prices. We see children falling through the cracks in North Dakota, where 1 in 12 children face hunger and nearly half of North Dakota households receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) support include children.¹

The research is clear: Access to meals in school helps children thrive. We know that improved access to free meals in school buffer food insecurity, improve dietary intake and diet quality, reduce childhood obesity, and improve school outcomes, including ameliorating behavioral issues, increasing student test scores, and reducing absenteeism.²

The best way to keep North Dakota legendary is to ensure our kids get a legendary start in life. HB 1491 establishes a strong foundation for strong and healthy North Dakotans. Because of this, the Foundation for a Healthy North Dakota urges a “yes” vote on HB 1491.

Thank you for your time.

References

1. Feeding America. (2023). *Hunger in North Dakota*. Retrieved January 29, 2023, from <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/north-dakota>.
2. Food Research and Action Center. (n.d.). *Benefits of school lunch*. Retrieved January 29, 2023 from <https://frac.org/programs/national-school-lunch-program/benefits-school-lunch>.