



North Dakota House of Representatives

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January 30, 2023

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Education Committee.

For the record, Zac Ista from District 43 in Grand Forks.

As the Committee just heard in testimony for HB 1491, many families across North Dakota struggle to afford the cost of school meals. While some families qualify for free or reduced cost meals, many other families earn incomes that put them just above the thresholds for qualifying for these programs. For those families, being able to afford meals for their children at school can be a real financial burden. Sometimes this means a child may go to school without any money left in his or her meal account or may carry an unpaid debt for meals previously received. That's why I believe we should find a way for the State of North Dakota to provide no-cost meals to all students. If we did that, HB 1494 would become largely unnecessary.

But unless and until we provide no-cost meals to all students, HB 1494 remains necessary, as it would ban the harmful practice known as "lunch shaming" in North Dakota. In doing so, we would be protecting children against harmful stigmatization if they cannot afford a school meal. No child should have to suffer such an embarrassment at school, especially on account of something they cannot control like their family's income.

Students who find themselves in these situations risk being subjected to a host of practices that stigmatize them or not having funds to pay for a school meal. As recently as 2014, according to a USDA report, nearly half of all schools nationwide had school meal policies that allowed students lacking meal funds or unpaid balances to be singled out, *i.e.* lunch shaming. This can take the form of throwing a child's meal in the trash when it is discovered he or she lacks money to pay for it, providing him or her an alternative meal like a cold cheese or PB&J sandwich instead of the hot meal other students receive, branding him or her with some sort of insignia (like a sticker or stamp on the hand) indicating an unpaid meal debt, or limiting his or her participation in extracurricular activities. In more extreme examples, schools in some districts across the country have even

threatened parents with placing their children into foster care for unpaid meal debt or submitted unpaid meal balances to private debt collectors who harass parents only to recover pennies on the dollar for local schools.

While we have avoided many of the most egregious lunch shaming stories here, North Dakota has not been completely immune to the problem, either. For example, local backlash to policies that allowed serving students alternative meals in some larger cities led those districts to revise formal policies (even though schools operating under earlier policies had continued to work with families and not harshly enforce them to the detriment of students). Now, thankfully, most of our schools have policies that largely or completely prohibit most lunch-shaming practices. In my hometown, for instance, existing policy in the Grand Forks Public School District already conforms with the proposals in HB 1494. This bill would make sure all students across the state receive equal treatment when it comes to their dignity in the school cafeteria no matter where they live.

To do so, the bill includes the following provisions:

- No alternative meals and no denying meals for students with insufficient funds;
- No throwing away of a student's meal on account of an unpaid balance;
- No identifying a student having meal debt with any sort of sticker or stamp;
- No limiting a student's ability to participate in school activities and extracurriculars, educational opportunities, or other school functions because of unpaid meal debt;
- No forcing a student to work off their debt through chores or other labor; and
- No sending of an unpaid meal balance to a private collection agency.

I have also requested an amendment making clear that 1) the provisions only apply to standard reimbursable school meals and not a la carte or second meal options, 2) a school may directly contact parents/guardians at any time to discuss unpaid meal debts or dwindling accounts balances, and 3) schools should encourage every family to apply for free and reduced-price lunches. These amendments would better protect local schools from potential abuse under these new policies and maximize their ability to receive federal reimbursement for qualifying students.

Each of the policies proposed in HB 1494 would protect students across North Dakota from the shame and stigma that could come from practices that publicly reveal a child as lacking money to pay for breakfast or lunch at school. They likewise would promote good childhood nutrition by ensuring every child has access to high-quality food regardless of whether they presently have money in their meal accounts. In doing so, we would set up all our students for better success in the classroom. North Dakota also would join at least 16 other states that have tackled the problem through legislation, including Minnesota, Iowa, South Carolina, Texas, Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia, New Mexico, Maine, Pennsylvania, Oregon, Washington, California, Illinois, New Jersey, and New York. In recent years, bipartisan leaders in Congress have introduced federal legislation to prohibit

lunch shaming, too. With HB 1494, North Dakota has a chance to step in where the federal government has failed to act thus far.

I understand, though, that some may question the need for the bill or have concerns about its potential impact on local school districts. While we always strive to promote local control, I believe feeding all students nutritious meals without risking shame or embarrassment for those unable to afford them ought to be a statewide priority, especially when we already invest substantial state funds into our local schools across North Dakota. I also am not unsympathetic to the difficulties unpaid meal debts can cause for our schools, especially smaller ones. Many districts are left to foot the bill for unpaid meals, often relying on the generosity of community donors to wipe this debt off the books. We heard ample testimony during the hearing on HB 1491 about why meal debt is increasing, and the impact that debt has both on families and schools. This is one reason why I so strongly support providing no-cost meals to all North Dakota schoolchildren. But even if we don't advance that bill, nothing in my bill prevents schools from trying to collect payment from parents if they do it in a manner that does not stigmatize students or utilizes private debt collection agencies. That's why the bill, for example, specifically permits schools to send home a sealed letter to parents alerting them to meal debt, and the proposed amendment would add additional clarity to the efforts a school can make to collect meal payment from parents. Schools also can roll over debt from year-to-year and engage in any other methods not prohibited by HB 1494 to try to recover meal costs, including continuing to solicit and accept donations from the community or civic groups and maximizing participation in the federal free and reduced-price meals program.

Others may have concerns about whether families will take advantage of this bill by simply not paying for school meals if schools have provide food to their children upon request. While there always may be bad actors inclined to abuse the system in this way, that won't be true for the vast majority of our families. I am very confident that honest, hard-working North Dakota families will do everything they can to pay for school meals to the maximum extent possible and pay off any unpaid debt as quickly as they can. I have complete faith that families who can afford to pay will continue to do so.

But for those who cannot, this bill will take one small element of shame off the table. Parents won't have to struggle knowing their children could be embarrassed in the lunchroom just because mom and dad fell on hard times. I think we owe that to our parents and our children. No child should ever go hungry during the school day, and this bill will help make sure that is always the case in North Dakota schools.

I urge this Committee to recommend a DO PASS on HB 1494, and I look forward to your questions.