

Testimony In Support of HB 1491

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Chair Elkin and Members of the Education Committee:

Please allow yourselves the chance to see a new and better way of supporting children and education in North Dakota. You have the power to change the school day for more students in our schools. With a “Do pass” recommendation, you can make happen this vision:

Each of the young people who enters a school gets what they need to support learning: desks, books, computers, a bus ride, and breakfast & lunch.

Experience and research have shown that nourishing food is essential to learning and as an integral part of the school day for all children. Children who do not have food security are at least twice as likely to report being in fair or poor health. Food insecurity in children is associated with poor educational performance and academic outcomes and with challenges in mental health and behavioral health.¹ Food at school served at lunch, breakfast, and/or healthful snacks is a vital source of healthful food for North Dakota’s children.

While increasing the percentage of federal poverty level for qualifying for free meals from 185% of federal poverty level to 200% of the FPL will reach more families, increasing the percentage to 400% of FPL would reach even more. The last analysis of levels of food insecurity by FPL in North Dakota was completed in 2019². In 2015-17, 28% of families experiencing food insecurity had incomes of 200-400% of the FPL (see slide 8 at https://www.ndlegis.gov/files/committees/66-2019/21_5053_03000appendixe.pdf)
By limiting the rate increase to 200% FPL, families will be missed, and children may go without breakfast or lunch.

Creative solutions are welcomed and needed to ensure that the most vulnerable among us, our children, have enough to eat now and into the future. Ensuring that all the children in our care in the state of North Dakota have enough to eat is a basic minimum that should and can be provided. Schools can continue to be trusted and available partners to get food to children when they have adequate support for the people and resources needed to provide vital school meals: food service personnel with adequate equipment and wages; food to serve, equipment to store, prepare and serve food during school the school day; and the ability to cover the expenses for doing so.

Healthy School Meals for All, or meals as an integrated part of the school day not singled out with a separate fee for families, can bring many benefits to students, schools, and our society. Food for school children is an worthy investment with dividends of healthier children with improved learning. Please give this bill a “Do pass” recommendation and vote for it on the floor of the House. **North Dakota families now and in the future will thank you for it.**

References:

1. *The Impact of Poverty, Food Insecurity, and Poor Nutrition on Health and Well-Being*, Food Research & Action Center, 2017. Accessed at <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/hunger-health-impact-poverty-food-insecurity-health-well-being.pdf>
2. *Food Insecurity in North Dakota*, North Dakota Kids Count, 2019, accessed at https://www.ndlegis.gov/files/committees/66-2019/21_5053_03000appendixe.pdf