

House Bill 1491

Chairman Elkin and members of the Senate Education Committee. For the record, I am Representative LaurieBeth Hager from District 21 in the central part of Fargo and now including a small portion of West Fargo. Within my district are 4 elementary schools, Madison, Jefferson, Hawthorne and LE Berger Elementary in West Fargo. There are middle students attending either Carl Ben Eielson or Ben Franklin Middle School or Cheney Middle School in WF. High school students attending either Fargo North or Fargo South High School or West Fargo HS. I am here today to present HB 1491 a bill to provide no cost school nutritional resources to students attending Public Schools in our state of North Dakota and to use moneys from the state general funds. HB 1491 has been amended by the House Education committee. This version of the bill will provide free school lunches to a greater number of ND students --those students whose family is earning lower than 200% of the poverty indicator. The estimated cost of this program is \$6 million dollars.

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, lead me to conclude that many classroom incidents or behavioral issues can be attributed to hunger/food insecurity.

According to the USDA, in 2020, 14.8 percent of children reported being food insecure in the past 30 days. 12 Million children live in food insecure households. What if a simple solution to enhance learning and prevent behavioral issues during the school day is simply to alleviate hunger and food insecurity? In ND, the rate of poverty is 11.4 %.

The National School Lunch Program was initiated in 1946 after it was realized during WWII that many men were unable to enlist in the military because of long term effects of childhood malnutrition. By 1975 breakfast was offered because many school children had 2 working parents. During the 2020, COVID Crisis, CARES ACT funds were utilized to provide free school lunches to ALL public school students. Sadly the federal free lunch for all programs were not renewed by the Biden Administration and families are again paying for their children's school lunches. As originally introduced HB 1491 would have reinstated Free Lunch for All.

In our state, public Awareness of student lunch debt increased after Fargo Public School had initiated a student debt policy that sent delinquent accounts to collection agencies. This stunning policy brought attention to the issue that families were unable to afford school lunches for their children.

Several advocacy groups across the state including the in Fargo the Lunch Aid group of musician and others, and Feed FM Kids,. In Grand Forks, there is a non profit group headed by 2 Female Hockey Gold Medal Olympians, in Minot a motorcycle group and in Bismarck a group of artists raised funds to pay off student lunch debt. Many other non profit organizations are engaged in

the mission of assuring students can eat lunch. But Student Lunch debt is not merely an issue in the larger cities of the state, I often hear the stories of how in our rural schools, teachers or others have kicked in to assist students/ families struggling with lunch debt.

Yesterday, the Senate Ed committee heard testimony on another bill, HB 1494 that specifically addresses “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. The original intent of HB 1491 was to completely eliminate lunch debt shaming because ALL students would be provided with a no cost meal.

The Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program is available to lower the costs of school lunch or school breakfast for economically disadvantaged families. The 2022 income guidelines for free and reduced lunch are calculated at 130% and 185% of the poverty level. Households with an income of \$36,075 for a family of 4 currently receive a free meal and households income of \$51,388 would receive 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 the problem exists where families do not qualify according to the federal income guidelines -- 73% of ND families do not qualify and must pay for their children’s school lunches. House Bill 1491 will provide for ND families earning less than 200% of the poverty level to be provided with a free school lunch. If the amended HB 1491 passes, a family of four earning \$60,000 will qualify for free school meals. I have handed out a chart with the 200% income guidelines

The Fiscal note for HB 1491 requests a \$6 Million appropriation for the biennium to provide school meals to approximately 13,000 students attending North Dakota public schools. House Bill 1491 would not duplicate the FFRLP, the funding from FFRLP but would be included in the formulation of the appropriation. When I first introduced this legislation two years ago, it was developed to utilize funding from the state Legacy Fund. But because of the new guidelines for Legacy Fund usage we are not requesting moneys from that fund this year. Instead this legislation requests general fund money to be allocated.

In the past 2 months, 5 or 6 states have already enacted legislation to provide free school meals to their students. Yesterday, March 14th, the Minnesota Senate joined the MN House in passing legislation to provide free school lunches with a \$200 million dollar price tag. Also this week the New Mexico legislature unanimously passed a bill to provide free school meals to all at a cost of \$22.5 million. Each of these bills will be on the governors’ desk for his or her signature. California, Colorado and Maine are additional states that currently provide free school meals.

I believe North Dakota’s most essential legacy is our children and their education is our future. Therefore, let us invest in the children who are in our care while they are in our classrooms.

I have several people here today or who have submitted written testimony 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.

When I was younger, ND proudly called itself the bread basket of the world, now in 2023 let's be a state known for providing our school children FREE Lunches rather than just a sandwich if their family falls behind on their lunch money account.

LET' S DO LUNCH

I thank the committee for your consideration of House Bill 1491 and I stand for questions.