

1 Tuesday, January 14, 2025

2 Levi Bachmeier, Business Manager, West Fargo Public Schools (WFPS)

3 Support for HB 1100

4 Good morning Chairman Heinert and members of the House Education  
5 Committee. My name is Levi Bachmeier, I am the Business Manager at West  
6 Fargo Public Schools. I am here today to speak to you in support of House Bill  
7 1100.

8 Since the legislative change to student meal supports in 2023, our district is on  
9 track to experience a 25-fold increase in unpaid meal debt. At this rate, we project  
10 to end the school year with over \$250,000 in unpaid balances. This is not  
11 exclusively a WFPS issue: in September data was shared with the interim School  
12 Funding Task Force highlighting how a smaller district had more meal debt by  
13 Labor Day than we have accumulated by Christmas. This is an unsustainable  
14 financial burden, exceeding the annual cost of hiring three new teachers. Without  
15 legislative support, our district faces the difficult reality of reallocating either  
16 state aid or local property tax dollars to cover this deficit, diverting critical  
17 resources away from all students to subsidize a small subset of families who are  
18 above the 200% poverty threshold.

19 We have implemented proactive measures to address this issue. Our district  
20 contacts families regularly to inform them with automated text messages of  
21 negative balances and ensure they are aware of their obligation to pay. Despite  
22 these efforts, the perception that school lunches should be free—combined with  
23 the growing understanding of limited recourse for nonpayment—has contributed  
24 to a ballooning of meal debt.

1 HB 1100 represents a critical step forward in addressing this challenge. By  
2 providing turnback funding to help defray the costs of unpaid meal debt, this  
3 legislation helps ensure that state aid dollars and property tax funds remain  
4 focused on their primary mission: educating students.

5 It is important to emphasize that this issue is not just about numbers; it is about  
6 fairness and equity. Every dollar diverted to cover unpaid meal balances is a  
7 dollar that could have been invested in classroom resources, technology,  
8 extracurricular programs, or additional staff to support students. Our educators  
9 and school leaders work hard to provide the best possible education to every  
10 child, but the system is undermined when financial resources are strained by a  
11 few who fail to meet their obligations.

12 We support efforts to assist families in need, including robust free and reduced-  
13 price meal programs. However, the current system is unsustainable and  
14 inequitable. I respectfully request you to support House Bill 1100. By addressing  
15 this critical issue, you will provide much-needed relief to school districts, protect  
16 valuable educational resources, and uphold the principle of fairness for all  
17 students and families.

18 Thank you for allowing me to testify today. I will now stand for questions if there  
19 are any at this time.