



1 **Testimony in Support of HB 1475 - NDCEL**

2 Chairperson and Members of the Committee, I stand before you today in **strong support of**
3 **House Bill 1475**, which seeks to provide **healthy school meals for all students at no cost**. This
4 legislation is **not just an investment in meals—it is an investment in student success,**
5 **economic stability, and North Dakota’s constitutional responsibility to provide a high-**
6 **quality education for all.**

7 **I. The Impact of Hunger on Student Learning**

8 **Students cannot learn when they are hungry.** Numerous studies confirm that **food insecurity**
9 **negatively affects cognitive development, academic performance, and classroom behavior.**

- 10 • **Academic Success:** Research from the National Bureau of Economic Research and the
11 American Psychological Association consistently shows that **students who have access**
12 **to consistent, nutritious meals score higher on standardized tests, have better**
13 **attendance, and demonstrate improved focus and classroom behavior.**
- 14 • **Chronic Absenteeism & Behavior Issues:** Schools that provide free meals report a
15 decrease in disciplinary actions and **higher student engagement.** Hunger leads to
16 **irritability, lack of concentration, and increased health issues,** which directly impact
17 student performance.
- 18 • **Long-Term Economic Benefits:** Feeding students is not a short-term welfare measure—
19 it is an **economic investment.** Studies indicate that **for every dollar invested in school**
20 **meal programs, the economy sees a return of up to \$2.50** in future earnings due to
21 improved education outcomes and workforce readiness.

22 By ensuring every child in North Dakota has **consistent access to healthy meals,** we are
23 providing a fundamental tool for **academic achievement and future workforce development.**

24 **II. Fiscal Responsibility: A Sound and Constitutional Investment**

25 The proposed **\$140 million** investment in this bill is comparable to the cost associated with
26 **Education Savings Accounts (ESA) proposals,** yet it **avoids the constitutional vulnerabilities**
27 that ESA programs face.

28 **A. The Constitutional Issues with ESA Programs**

29 Recent legal decisions, including in **South Carolina, Kentucky, and Arizona,** have **struck**
30 **down ESA programs due to constitutional conflicts** related to public funding for private and
31 religious schools. **North Dakota’s Constitution (Article X, Section 18) explicitly prohibits**
32 **public funds from directly or indirectly supporting sectarian schools.**



- 1 • ESA funds **inevitably flow into private and religious institutions**, making them legally
2 vulnerable under North Dakota’s **strict constitutional provisions against public dollars**
3 **funding private education.**
- 4 • ESA programs in other states have been **blocked or significantly altered** due to **funding**
5 **loopholes, lack of accountability, and concerns over misallocation of taxpayer**
6 **dollars.**

7 By contrast, **HB 1475 is legally sound, aligns with North Dakota’s constitutional duty to**
8 **fund public education, and directly benefits every student without legal risk.**

9 **B. Ensuring Public Funds Serve Public Interests**

- 10 • The **primary role of the state budget should be to support a high-quality public**
11 **education system.**
- 12 • HB 1475 ensures that **state dollars directly enhance student success**, providing
13 immediate benefits **without the risk of costly legal battles.**
- 14 • **Rather than diverting public funds to private institutions**, which creates inequities,
15 this bill **strengthens North Dakota’s commitment to providing an equitable,**
16 **effective, and constitutionally sound public education system.**

17 **III. Addressing Misinformation About "Universal Free Meals"**

18 Some may argue that **parents should be responsible for their child’s meals**, but **our schools**
19 **already serve as critical nutrition providers** for thousands of North Dakota families.

- 20 • **More than 1 in 6 children** in North Dakota face **food insecurity**—meaning they
21 regularly experience hunger due to financial hardship.
- 22 • Many **working-class families** earn just above the threshold for free and reduced-price
23 meals but still struggle to afford consistent, nutritious food.
- 24 • Providing **universal free meals** removes the stigma for children receiving free lunches
25 and eliminates **administrative burdens** on school districts, ensuring **no child falls**
26 **through the cracks.**
- 27 • This bill provides as much **support for a family’s budget** as does ESA’s in a way that
28 we can all stand together and support and nobody is arguing, fighting, taking people to
29 court, or damaging relationships in a time when we need to stand together for our kids.

30 This legislation allows **all students, regardless of family income, to focus on learning rather**
31 **than hunger.**

32 **IV. Conclusion: Prioritizing Students Over Legal Battles**

33 House Bill 1475 offers a **clear, effective, and constitutional** approach to **ensuring every child**
34 **in North Dakota receives the nutrition they need to thrive academically.**

*NDCEL is the strongest unifying voice representing and supporting administrators and educational leaders in pursuit of quality education
for all students in North Dakota.*

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- 1 By passing this bill, the legislature **chooses to invest in proven student success strategies**
2 **rather than risky, legally questionable ESA programs.**
- 3 North Dakota has the **financial capacity** to do this, and **our children deserve nothing less.**
4 Let's make sure that **every student in every school has the foundation they need to succeed.**
- 5 **I respectfully urge this committee to support House Bill 1475 and ensure that no child in**
6 **North Dakota goes hungry while trying to learn.**
- 7 Thank you. I welcome any questions.
- 8