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**HB 1475**

**Testimony of Amy De Kok  
House Education Committee  
February 3, 2025**

Chairman Heinert and members of the House Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. My name is Amy De Kok, and I serve as the executive director for the North Dakota School Boards Association. I am here to express our support of HB 1475, which seeks to provide universal free school breakfast and lunch for all students in participating schools across North Dakota. This legislation represents a critical investment in the well-being, academic success, and long-term health of our children, ensuring that no student goes hungry while at school.

Numerous studies confirm that students who have consistent access to nutritious meals perform better academically, experience improved cognitive function and demonstrate better classroom behavior. HB 1475 would remove the stigma associated with free and reduced-price meal programs, ensuring that every child, regardless of their family's economic status, receives the nourishment they need to thrive.

Food insecurity remains a persistent challenge for many families, and the cost of school meals can place undue stress on those struggling to make ends meet. While existing federal programs provide some relief, they do not reach all students in need, and the burdens of paperwork and qualification thresholds often exclude families experiencing financial hardship. By fully funding school meals for all students, this legislation would create a more equitable and inclusive educational environment.

Some have argued that education funding should be directed toward expanding school choice through the establishment of public charter schools and education savings accounts (ESAs) instead. While school choice initiatives may benefit a select group of students, they divert critical public resources away from neighborhood schools, often leaving traditional public school students with fewer resources and opportunities. By contrast, universal free school meals benefit every child in every school district, strengthening the public education system as a whole. The \$140 million appropriation in this bill represents a direct investment in student well-being and success, whereas establishing charter schools and ESAs can lead to increased educational inequality and financial strain on public schools.

North Dakota has a responsibility to prioritize policies that benefit the largest number of students and ensuring that every child has access to nutritious meals is one of the most effective ways to support their academic growth and overall development. The benefits of this program—improved educational outcomes, reduced absenteeism, and better health—far outweigh the costs.

HB 1475 is a commonsense, research-backed policy that will ensure that all students have the nutrition they need to succeed. It is a more direct and impactful way to support student learning than diverting funds to school privatization efforts. I urge this committee to issue a DO PASS recommendation on HB 1475 and reaffirm North Dakota's commitment to high-quality public education for all students.

Thank you for your time and consideration.