

1 HB 1475 –House Education Committee – By: Michelle Wagner, RD, SNS, Child
2 Nutrition Program Director Bismarck Public School District, Legislative Chair
3 North Dakota School Nutrition Association

4 Chairman Heinert and Member of the Committee:

5 My name is Michelle Wagner, and I am the Child Nutrition Program Director for
6 Bismarck Public Schools and the Legislative Chair for the North Dakota School
7 Nutrition Association. As a registered dietitian I have worked in school nutrition for
8 the past thirteen years. I am here today, providing testimony in favor of HB 1475.

9 You’re likely to hear testimony about how this bill will benefit North Dakota
10 families, reduce stigma for students who rely on school meals, and address the
11 fundamental truth that a hungry child cannot learn. Let me begin by saying that I
12 wholeheartedly agree with all these points. However, rather than reiterate them, I’d
13 like to offer a different perspective. Today, I want to focus on some of the economic
14 benefits this bill will bring to our local communities if healthy meals for all is
15 implemented.

16 Let’s start with milk. Recently, HB 1132 was passed with the primary goal to
17 increase the quantity of milk purchased by schools. However, evidence suggests that
18 providing breakfast and lunch at no charge leads to a natural increase in milk sales
19 for our local farmers. During the 2023-2024 school year, Bismarck Public Schools
20 purchased 1.3 million cartons of milk and served slightly over 2 million meals. Based
21 on this information, approximately two-thirds of students selected milk with their
22 meals, which aligns with the National Dairy Council's finding that 65% of students
23 nationwide choose milk with school meals.

1 Using this trend and factoring in projected participation increases across the state of
2 20% at breakfast and 15% at lunch, we estimate that an **additional 4,225 cartons of**
3 **milk** could be taken daily at breakfast and an **additional 8,000 cartons of milk**
4 could be selected daily at lunch. Altogether, this could result in North Dakota school
5 districts purchasing an **additional 2.1 million cartons** of milk annually.

6 Now, let's consider the impact on jobs. School meal programs operate based on a
7 "meals per labor hour" model. In simple terms, the more meals served, the more
8 labor hours are required, which leads to additional job opportunities. Conversely,
9 when meal participation declines, hours and jobs are often reduced.

10 With an anticipated 20% increase in breakfast and a 15% increase in lunch, this
11 would directly translate into more job opportunities within our communities. While
12 some districts might be concerned about the challenge of finding additional staff,
13 from an economic perspective, creating more jobs is undeniably beneficial for the
14 local economy.

15 My third and final point is the additional federal revenue provided through the U.S.
16 Agricultural Commodities program. For every reimbursable meal served, school
17 nutrition programs receive \$0.45 in entitlement funds, which are allocated to
18 purchase U.S. agricultural products. In the 2023–2024 school year, North Dakota
19 received \$6.7 million in federal entitlement funds. These funds support the
20 procurement of items such as beef, chicken, potatoes, cheese, fruits, and vegetables.

21 Based on projected increases in meal participation, North Dakota could receive an
22 **additional one million dollars** in entitlement funds. This increase would directly
23 benefit not only North Dakota farmers but also agricultural producers across the
24 country, further strengthening our agricultural economy.

1 In conclusion, supporting healthy school meals for all invests in our children,
2 communities, and local economy, creating jobs and boosting demand for local
3 agriculture. On behalf of Bismarck Public Schools and the North Dakota School
4 Nutrition Association, I urge you to support HB 1475 for a healthier, stronger future
5 for North Dakota.