

Testimony in Support of House Bill 1553

Chairman Heinert and Members of the House Education Committee,

My name is Robin Nelson, and I submit testimony on behalf of the Fargo Board of Education in strong support of House Bill 1553, which funds universal school meals for all North Dakota students alongside the National School Lunch Program.

Ensuring every student has access to nutritious meals is essential for learning and success. Hunger negatively affects concentration, memory, and classroom engagement. By providing meals to all students, we eliminate barriers to learning and create a supportive, inclusive school environment.

Benefits of Universal School Meals:

1. **Improved Academic Performance & Attendance** – Research shows that well-nourished students score higher on tests and are more engaged. The **Food Research & Action Center** found that universal school meals improve math and reading scores by **14%**. A **2020 JAMA Pediatrics** study found that schools with universal meals report **higher attendance rates**, especially among low-income students.
2. **Eliminating Stigma & Reducing Stress** – School meal debt and eligibility requirements can isolate students. According to the **Urban Institute**, students in free or reduced-price meal programs often experience social stigma. The **National Bureau of Economic Research** found that universal meal programs increase student participation and reduce the embarrassment tied to meal assistance, fostering a sense of belonging.
3. **Supporting Families & Reducing Food Insecurity** – Many working families do not qualify for free or reduced-price meals but still struggle to afford school meals. The **USDA** reports that **one in six North Dakota children** lives in a food-insecure household. Universal meals ensure all students receive the nutrition they need, allowing families to allocate resources to other essential needs.
4. **Long-Term Health Benefits** – Consistent access to healthy meals reduces the risk of childhood obesity, diabetes, and other health conditions. The **American Academy of Pediatrics** states that children with stable access to nutritious meals have **lower rates of diet-related diseases** and better overall health. Investing in school meals fosters lifelong healthy habits and reduces future healthcare costs for families and the state.

While we recognize the financial implications of this bill, leveraging state and federal funding maximizes resources while ensuring no child goes hungry. Universal meals benefit students, families, schools, and communities.

I respectfully urge this committee to support House Bill 1553 and take a stand for the health, dignity, and success of North Dakota's children.

Respectfully,
Robin Nelson, Fargo Board of Education