

**Testimony for HB 1553**

**House Education Committee**

**Greg Gallagher**

**February 10, 2025**

Mr. Chairman and members of the House Education Committee,

I am Greg Gallagher, a resident of Mandan, a member of the Mandan Health Coalition, and Vice-Chair of the Statewide Advocacy and Engagement Committee of the American Health Association in North Dakota. I provide this testimony as a private citizen and not as a lobbyist or representative for any other party. I testify in support of HB 1553 based on my understanding of this matter gained through my involvement with these and other organizations, and my over four-decades long career involving educational matters.

HB 1553 presents, as does HB 1475 to which I have previously provided testimony, a long-overdue remedy to a persistent school readiness hurdle: how to provide nutritious meals to all students in our state's elementary and secondary schools as a component of their education, thereby affording them the best opportunity to learn and grow academically and socially to their fullest potential. I commend the sponsors of this bill for advancing a vehicle to consider an alternative approach to funding this initiative. Whichever funding approach is ultimately selected by the Committee, whether it be from HB 1553 or HB 1475, hold true to the fundamental policy intent of providing school meals to students.

Both HB 1553 and HB 1475 ensure that students who would not otherwise be eligible to receive school meals will be provided such an opportunity. Although federal programs offer some level of funding for low-income families, the specified eligibility levels have long been identified as too low, burdened by paperwork, or perceived as a source of shame for families. Students have been known to go without food rather than place themselves in a position of shame. Some schools attempt to help some students with a simple cheese sandwich--if they are aware or can. Some individuals may criticize providing school meals, observing that parents should have "skin in the game" by providing for their children's lunches. Yet, it is the child who

ultimately suffers the hunger, shame, and disregard of a system that appears all too indifferent to their experienced reality.

HB 1553 leverages federal funding to help offset state expenses. Some parents may continue to prepare lunches and snacks for their children. Yet for many parents, school meals provided under HB 1553 will be received gratefully as a means to reduce their financial burden or other stressors.

School meal programs are widely popular with voters and the public. It has been my experience that when individuals are asked about providing school meals to students, many people express surprise that students are not already provided food as a component of education in our schools. The public supports the intent of both HB 1553 and HB 1475.

Where HB 1553 and HB 1475 effectively differ is in specifying from which source funding would be drawn: either the General Fund or the Legacy Fund. I encourage the House Education Committee to choose that bill which best advances this policy initiative through to ultimate passage. Work to perfect the selected bill, ensuring that the policy statements are sound, and the selected funding source is most defensible—at least in the eyes of the House Appropriations Committee. Do not leave a hole from which the Appropriations Committee might stray from their funding role and delve into your role for policy development, which has been known to happen.

I believe HB 1475 offers the best foundational basis to secure the needed policy statement. HB 1553's contribution is to ensure that the Committee consider the best options to structure and fund this initiative.

I ask that you vote to provide school meals to the children of our state. Please structure a reconciliation between HB 1553 and HB 1475 to accomplish this aim.

Thank you.