

Testimony in Support of Universal School Meals for All Students

Chairman Heinart and Members of the Committee,

I am here today to express my strong support for House Bill 1553. My name is Leslie Bieber and I am the Superintendent of Alexander Public School District. This bill represents an equitable investment in North Dakota's children who are our TRUE Legacy.

Decades of research confirm that proper nutrition is a fundamental driver of student success. Children who receive consistent, nutritious meals experience improved cognitive function better attendance and higher academic performance.

North Dakota has a proud tradition of supporting families, and this bill upholds that value by ensuring all students whether in public or private settings receive the nourishment they need to reach their full potential.

This initiative aligns with the principles of an Education Savings Account (ESA) by alleviating an essential educational expense, school meals, and allowing families to redirect those savings toward tuition, fees, tutors, technology, or other educational resources.

Currently, families who qualify for free and reduced-price meals benefit from federal funding, while those who do not qualify must pay out of pocket. This creates an uneven financial burden depending on family income and school choice. HB 1553 establishes a fair and universal approach where:

- **The state provides a fixed dollar amount per student** to cover meal costs for those who do not qualify for federal assistance.
- **Meals must meet state nutritional standards** to ensure all children receive healthy and balanced food options.
- **Private school students without a meal program can apply this benefit toward packed meals** that meet state guidelines.

By implementing this system, all families, regardless of income or school type, receive equal financial support, reducing stress on household budgets.

In exchange for this funding, all educational entities, public nonpublic must maintain reasonable accountability measures to ensure proper meal use.

- Schools already participating in the National School Lunch Program have existing reporting structures in place to verify compliance with federal meal standards.
- Private schools that do not have lunch programs must certify that families are using their meal stipends appropriately and can establish minimal record-keeping requirements.

Beyond the educational impact, this bill provides long-term economic benefits to the state:

- **Family Savings Boost Local Economies** – Reducing meal expenses allows families to reinvest money into their communities.
- **Reduced Healthcare Costs** – Proper childhood nutrition lowers obesity, diabetes, and other chronic conditions, reducing future healthcare expenses.
- **Workforce Readiness** – Well-nourished students perform better in school and are better prepared to contribute to North Dakota’s workforce in the future.

North Dakota has the opportunity to provide educational equity by ensuring all students, regardless of school type, receive equal support in nutrition. HB 1553 does not create a new government program but fairly reallocates existing resources to ensure that no child in North Dakota goes hungry at school.

I ask this committee to support House Bill 1553 and take a bold step toward ensuring that every student, in every school choice has the nutrition they need to learn and thrive.

Thank you for your time and consideration.