

Joint Appropriation Committee

Chairmen Bekkedahl and Vigessa

HB 1624 – School Breakfast and Lunch

Submitted by: Shane Goettle, on behalf of the State Association of Nonpublic Schools (SANS)

January 21, 2026

Chairmen Bekkedahl and Vigessa and Members of the Committee: My name is Shane Goettle, and I am submitting this testimony on behalf of the State Association of Nonpublic Schools (SANS) in support of House Bill 1624.

HB 1624 creates a statewide framework to ensure that every North Dakota student has access to one breakfast and one lunch each school day at no cost. It authorizes reimbursement for schools, establishes a dedicated School Meals Fund, and appropriates \$65 million to implement the program. This bill will benefit all students--public, nonpublic, tribal, and BIE--and supports families during a time of rising costs.

HB 1624 provides meaningful financial relief to families

North Dakota families are facing rising food, housing, and childcare expenses. Even with the efficiencies of school meal programs, the cost of feeding a child breakfast and lunch daily amounts to roughly \$1,800 per school year for many households--a significant burden discussed by school leaders.

HB 1624 entirely eliminates this cost for families with children in participating schools (public schools are required to participate; nonpublic schools may opt in). This is a benefit to *all* North Dakota families with school-age children.

Well-nourished students learn better

Administrators across school types agree that students who come to school hungry struggle with attention, engagement, and performance.

HB 1624 supports improved statewide educational outcomes by ensuring consistent access to nutritious meals--the very foundation of student readiness. The bill ties reimbursement to participation in the USDA child nutrition programs and encourages families to apply for free or reduced-price meals, ensuring efficient, accountable administration. This positions North Dakota to support stronger outcomes on state assessments and daily learning.

Aligns with the state's obligation to support compulsory education

North Dakota requires children to attend school. When the state mandates attendance, it accepts a responsibility to ensure basic conditions for learning--including nutrition.

HB 1624 reflects that principle by guaranteeing every student access to meals at school, regardless of family income, school type, or geographic location.

The bill reflects overwhelming public support

Recent polling shows support for universal school meals at levels such as 80/20 among North Dakota voters. They reflect what our schools hear consistently from families: School meals for all children is common-sense, broadly supported policy.

HB 1624 channels that popular support into a clear, effective statutory approach.

HB 1624 offers a clear, practical process for implementation

HB 1624:

- Provides direct reimbursement for the difference between maximum federal rates and what schools actually receive.
- Creates a School Meals Fund in the state treasury.
- Transfers \$65 million from the Strategic Investment and Improvements Fund to pay for the program.
- Ensures the Superintendent of Public Instruction has rulemaking authority for timely implementation.

This structure keeps administration straightforward, predictable, and equitable across public, nonpublic, tribal, and BIE schools.

Nonpublic schools appreciate the bill's voluntary opt-in approach. Many are prepared to participate and communicate quickly with families about program requirements, including the encouragement to submit federal meal eligibility information.

6. HB 1624 is preferable to a constitutional ballot measure

As Rep. Nathe and others have noted, if the Legislature addresses this issue through statute, it reduces the likelihood of a constitutional measure being pursued. HB 1624 keeps policy flexible and within legislative oversight rather than locking it into the constitution.

Conclusion

HB 1624 is a strong policy that: supports all North Dakota families, improves educational outcomes, aligns with the state's responsibility for children it requires to attend school, reflects overwhelming public support, provides an efficient reimbursement mechanism, includes nonpublic schools in a sensible way. On behalf of the State Association of Nonpublic Schools, I respectfully urge this committee to give **HB 1624 a Do Pass recommendation**.

Thank you for your consideration.