



North Dakota House of Representatives

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Good afternoon, Chairs Bekkedahl and Vigasaa and members of the Joint Appropriations Committee. My name is Representative Ty Dressler from District 36 in Richardton.

Last summer and fall I set out to look for improvements and efficiencies in North Dakota's school lunch program. During and after last session, it was evident the subject of school lunches was a source of public debate and many of us felt this topic needed further review.

The very simple purpose of House Bill 1627 is to increase the State-funded school lunch program qualifications to 300% of poverty level, from the current 225% level. I thought the information gathered was worthy of your time and consideration as we look at all the options going forward, whether that be by ballot measure or legislation.

Current poverty level as designated by the Federal Government is a household income of \$32,150 for a family of four. The Federal rate for free lunches is 130% of that number, or around \$42,000, and the reduced lunch rate is around \$59,000 of income. Those reduced rate lunch recipients then receive the State 225 program funds to get to a no-cost status, as do other students up to \$72,000 of household income. This is the current program we are using in ND, and the 69th Assembly appropriated \$6MM in the last regular session.

Increasing the state-subsidized program to 300% of Federal poverty level would take that income threshold to \$96,450 for a family of four. One estimate from the ND Department of Public Instruction showed the 225% level to encompass approximately 2,972 additional students of the approximately 125,000 students in North Dakota that are able to be considered for free or reduced lunches (meaning those that are not homeschooled). The same estimate exercise from the DPI shows an additional 2,300 students could be added for each additional 25% raise in the percentage of poverty level, meaning that by increasing the level to 300% we should gain approximately 7,000 to 7,500 students receiving the state dollars.

North Dakota receives about \$38MM per school year for the approximately 38,000 ND students who qualify for federal meal reimbursement. Around 26,000 of those students DIRECTLY qualify due to participation in other programs such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition

Assistance Program). This means they don't need to fill out any additional forms. If the State were to change to an unlimited income program, we'd need to make sure we still capitalize on the Federal dollars for those who don't automatically qualify.

I believe a more comprehensive look at how the Free and Reduced Meal program is administered is in order, no matter how we proceed in the next few days. It is critical that we, as a state, maximize the federal funding available, preserving as many state dollars as possible. A local school in my district has 18% participation in the program, but the local liaison believes it should be much higher. Perhaps we can use state employees or other local organizations to help enroll and verify applicants. Do we need more staffing at DPI or dedicated funding for promotion of the current Federal and State options? Can we make the online sign-up easier, more streamlined, and more efficient? This is all work for the interim and for the next regular session, however.

This bill represents a very simple, yet cost-effective, targeted, and budget-friendly approach to providing school meals to those who really need the help. It presents an alternative for the voting public when considering the proposed measure. I believe the current policies in place are doing a great job of feeding our students and with a few minor tweaks in administration, we can even increase participation and positive outcomes.

In talking with many legislators in both chambers, many have said they support this idea wholeheartedly as good policy. We, as a body need to decide, is good policy enough and then go to work educating the public? Are we willing to gamble under the threat of a measure changing our State Constitution and mandating funding?

Thanks for your consideration,

Ty Dressler

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