

January 24, 2021

Testimony of Jason Boynton
In Support of HB 1413
North Dakota State University
Fargo, ND 58108-6050

Greetings, Chairman Owens and members of the House Education Committee:

My name is Jason Boynton and I am a resident of Fargo, ND, professor of mathematics, and a musician. I am testifying as a citizen in support of House Bill 1413.

In 2019, local news sources reported that Fargo Public Schools (FPS) was holding a student school lunch debt of about \$26,000. It was also reported that \$15,000 of the debt had been turned over to collections. My partner Kari Lugo and I co-produced a fundraising event called LUNCH AID 2019 and we managed to raise \$20,000 to put towards that debt. As a result of our efforts, we paid off the balance in collections for AY 2018/2019 and we raised awareness around food insecurity in schools. Indeed, a very generous anonymous donor paid the \$27,000 debt accrued for the first half of AY 19/20 only. There was no lunch debt for the second half of AY 19/20 due to school closings. Moreover, Fargo Public Schools Superintendent, Rupak Gandhi rescinded the punitive action (from the previous administration) of referring students with an unpaid school lunch debt to a collection's agency. Many other school districts have removed similar punitive actions as a consequence of unpaid lunch debt.

Now that schools are beginning to resume in-person instruction, the FPS district projects that there will be a school lunch debt of at least \$30,000 just for the second half of AY 20/21. As a result of the pandemic, it is reasonable to estimate that the amount will be much higher. FPS can expect a debt of \$65,000 (at the very least) in AY 21/22 since school will be in session for the whole year.

It is literally shameful to refer kids' families to collection agencies for outstanding school lunch debt. These punitive actions shame students and their families for falling into financial hardship. To give a kid anything less than a hot meal for not having funds to cover it is the truest definition of lunch-shaming. To refuse to allow a student to walk at their graduation ceremony or attend their prom is shameful. Thankfully, a number of other school districts have agreed to refrain from punitive actions, like referral to collections. We should not in punish these schools for doing the right thing. We can lighten the load for the already-overburdened North Dakota public school districts another way.

How can we achieve all this? The answer is simple. The state of North Dakota can use part of its \$7,000,000,000 Legacy Fund to provide NO-COST BREAKFAST AND LUNCH for all public-school students. The state could easily use one interest payment from the Legacy Fund to set up an endowment that would become self-sustaining after a few years. In other words, we can set up a fund that would provide all public-school students a no-cost hot meal in perpetuity!

Why should the state of North Dakota do this? There are several reasons to enact a NO-COST BREAKFAST AND LUNCH program in the state. First, we (The People) provide almost all the basic necessities for a student to be successful in the classroom. We provide educators, buildings with multiple facilities (e.g., labs and gymnasiums), textbooks, desks, computers, and many other products and services. Good nutrition is the most fundamental need, and is absolutely critical for student success. Every expert will agree that young minds function the best when their bellies are full. Providing a NO-COST BREAKFAST AND LUNCH is tantamount to providing the best public education that we can. The second reason that we should provide NO-COST BREAKFAST AND LUNCH is that it places all public-school students on equal footing. Kids are NOT responsible for their socio-economic status. Therefore, we should not reward or punish kids for their lot in life. If everybody receives a NO-COST BREAKFAST AND LUNCH, then everybody is on the same level playing field. No student will be judged or shamed if all students have equal access to two no-cost hot meals every day. Finally, we should do this because WE CAN AFFORD IT! This state is sitting on a huge sum of money. For what? A rainy day? Today is the rainy day. We should spend this money on our citizens that need it the most. With a NO-COST BREAKFAST AND LUNCH program in place, the average ND family with 2.5 kids will save about \$2,200 per year. We are not misers. North Dakotans are generous. Let us prove it. Let us be a model for the nation with a NO-COST BREAKFAST AND LUNCH program. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

I strongly and enthusiastically recommend a “Do Pass” recommendation on House Bill 1413.

Sincerely,

Jason Boynton, Ph.D.
Lunch Aid, North Dakota