

## Testimony in Support of HB 1413

### ND House Education Committee

January 25, 2021

Chairman Owens, Vice Chair Schreiber-Beck, distinguished members of the House Committee on Education:

I am Bennet B. Tucker from St. Thomas, North Dakota. Today I am speaking only on my own behalf. I come before you to speak in favor of HB 1413.

I have a granddaughter, Ella, whom I love very much. A few years ago, when she was in 1st grade, our daughter fell behind on the Hot Lunch bill out of mere forgetfulness. I raised my children in small St. Thomas where, if you forgot, you'd get a call from sweet Betty Walski at the school and she would chew you out and then I'd go and get caught up.

Ella, however, goes to school in Grand Forks. At that time, the way to remind parents was to put a stamp on the child's hand. Cafeteria staff calls this The Stamp Of Shame. Fortunately, Ella was too young to be embarrassed and her peers were too young to tease her about it.

An angry grandfather is not a pretty sight and I was pretty angry. For a school to embarrass a student in front of their peers is simply unacceptable. The staff takes no joy in not feeding children. Their joy comes from feeding children. If the goal of a school's administration is see that some kids come to hate school, then embarrassing students is the best way to achieve that goal.

Make no mistake. The children are blameless here. They do not handle the family finances. They are totally innocent, yet they bear all of the punishment.

Make no mistake. The children we are talking about are frequently the ones for whom a good education is the only path for improving their lives. These are "at risk" children.

Make no mistake. I come before you not only so my four grandchildren are never embarrassed or stay away from the school cafeteria in hunger and come to hate going to school. I come before you because, as a citizen of North Dakota, I don't want to see any of our students hungry or shamed.

So I went to Grand Forks. I know someone on the City Council and he put in contact with his wife who, at the time, was on the school board. They made time for me on their agenda to discuss the problem. Grand Forks stopped using The Stamp Of Shame in the elementary schools and looked into starting up a charity so reduce the number of high school students who skipped lunch instead of suffering the embarrassment of a soybutter sandwich. For most schools, it used to be a peanut butter sandwich; but with allergies they have switched to soy.

Since then, I have tried to remain informed on the Hot Lunch Program. I've read accounts from across the nation when perfectly good meals were thrown a large garbage can rather than given to a child whose family was behind on the bill. I've read accounts of cafeteria workers threatening to quit rather than to continue stamping innocent children. I've watched as other states wrestled with this problem and came up with various solutions. While perhaps a small thing in the grand scope of the world's problems, it has become very important to me even though I've been blessed with a good life and paying some lunch bills is not a burden.

As for the specifics of HB 1413, that is beyond me. I am a dirt farmer. My only qualifications to offer any testimony are that I'm a citizen and a grandfather. I do not know the intricacies of governance. I do not know how the Legacy Fund was supposed to work nor how it currently works nor the priorities set for those monies. However, I do believe that within my House Education Committee we have such expertise. We have here legislators with decades of experience on school boards. We have legislators who were school administrators. We have religious people who follow the gospels and never want to see the children harmed for a situation not of their making. Inside this committee, we have the knowledge and experience to move forward.

So I stand in support of HB 1413. I urge a Do Pass recommendation.

More than that, however, I urge you to come together as a committee and agree the most basic of principles. Shame no student. Feed every child.

Bennet B. Tucker