



North Dakota House of Representatives

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COMMITTEES:
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Education Committee:

For the record, Zac Ista, from District 43 in Grand Forks.

I am thrilled to stand in support of a simple but powerful statement of our North Dakota values: that all students across our state should receive healthy, nutritious school meals at no cost to their families. I am grateful to Rep. Hager for her efforts in bringing this bill forward and for all the work she's done for many years to elevate this issue to the forefront. I will keep my comments brief so that you can hear from the many, many advocates behind me who will share just how important healthy meals for all are and why it's time for North Dakota to provide them to students everywhere throughout our great state.

We know that ensuring all students have equal access to nutritious meals is one of the best ways to promote their educational and emotional development, reduce behavioral problems in the classroom, and increase positive academic outcomes in our schools. We also know that over a quarter of all North Dakota schoolchildren qualify for free or reduced-price meals, but thousands more families hover just above the household income limits for this federal program. For those families, the stress of affording school meals (sometimes for multiple children in the home) causes real anxiety and meaningful strain on household budgets, especially during this period of rising costs.

With this bill, we have an opportunity to provide real, substantial relief to these families by establishing our own North Dakota no-cost school meals program. In doing so, we would join Maine, Colorado, California, Vermont, Nevada, and Massachusetts in extending no-cost meals to all students. With our current strong fiscal outlook, it's an investment we can and should make. With our current workforce challenges, it's an investment that can and will encourage more families to make North Dakota their home.

While I strongly believe that moving North Dakota to no-cost school meals is the right policy, I appreciate the many challenges that could arise in making it a reality. Beyond the cost, there will be administrative burdens. New forms may need to be created, new rules crafted, and new policies written. It seems daunting, for sure. But I ask this committee not to let these challenges be a reason to say no. Every potential question has an answer; every potential problem has a solution. And I'm happy to do my best to explore those answers and solutions with this Committee. We also have countless advocates and subject matter experts both in the public and private sectors ready to help. Whether it's working through amendments with this Committee, advancing the bill to the Appropriations Committee for further work, partnering with our colleagues in the Senate to hone this legislation, or empowering the Department of Public Instruction and local districts to implement our legislative priorities, we have ample opportunities to perfect this policy and have no-cost school meals for every North Dakota student as early as the 2023-24 academic year.

That's why, at bottom, I encourage this Committee to advance a bill that makes it our state's policy 1) to provide meals to all school children, 2) to make those meals no-cost to all North Dakota families, and 3) to maximize the amount of federal funds (and other private and public dollars) we receive to offset the financial cost to our state. I am ready to actively help this Committee and this Assembly make it happen. Thank you for your time and consideration of this hugely important bill. I urge a DO PASS of HB 1491, and I stand ready to answer any questions you might have.