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HB 1494
House Education
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Testimony of Alexis Baxley

Good afternoon, Chairman Heinert, and members of the House Education Committee. My name is Alexis Baxley, and I serve as the executive director of the North Dakota School Boards Association. NDSBA represents the elected school boards of all 170 public school districts and several special education units in North Dakota.

I am here today with conditional support for HB 1494. As you are likely aware, especially after hearing the previous bill, school lunch debt can be a very significant issue in many of our schools. While many, if not most, districts have moved away from the “shaming” type policies referenced in the first five subsections of HB 1494, they still wish to retain the ability to send bills to collections *only when absolutely necessary*. While many districts have been lucky to have local businesses and supporters contribute towards unpaid debt, others have used general fund monies to cover the deficit. Districts do not send every negative balance to collections – they are often aware of the likelihood of payment or other situations and take these factors into consideration when deciding whether or not to use a collection agency. Unfortunately, if districts are prohibited from using a collections agency or using any other form of incentive to encourage payment, I am not sure why any parent would ever have reason to pay for school lunches. I realize disincentivizing payment is not the intent of this bill, but it could very well have that effect. Unpaid balances will likely surpass public appetite and the ability of district funds to cover them.

School districts are very aware of the very real effect proper nutrition has on a student’s ability to learn; hungry children are not ready to learn. However, this bill could negatively impact a district’s financial stability. NDSBA believes that the suggestions provided by Dr. Copas and NDCEL could counter this impact and make this bill better. State funding, the ability to levy mills to cover the debt, and/or retaining the ability to send these debts to collections would allow districts to feed students without increasing the odds of negative fiscal impact.

I respectfully ask that you consider the amendments submitted by Dr. Copas and with them would encourage you to give HB 1494 a do-pass recommendation. Thank you.