

Chairman Elkin and Members of the Committee,

My name is Heather Gades, and I am a titleholder at the local level within the Miss America Organization and a candidate for Miss North Dakota this coming June – however, my testimony does not necessarily reflect the views of either the Miss America Organization or the Miss North Dakota Organization. My current title is Miss Bonanzaville, and as a titleholder, we each select a service initiative that we want to support and work on during our year of service. Mine is Combatting Food Insecurity – One Box at a Time, a project that is the culmination of my six years of working on this issue. I have met with food pantries in the Fargo-Moorhead area, volunteered at a few, helped create the first food pantry at North Dakota State University (NDSU) called Goods for the Herd and currently am on the advisory board in a volunteer capacity, attended meetings, and read books to school children that talk about food insecurity, how it can happen to anyone, and who we can go to for help. I want to talk about my experience with lunch shaming and why this bill matters so much to me.

When I was 16, my mom got a promotion at work, and we no longer qualified for reduced price meals at school. The cost of school lunches basically doubled for my family only two months into the school year. There were three of us in school at that time: myself and two younger sisters. By the end of the year, we had a negative meal balance of around \$1,000. We were fortunate to go to a school that did not take away our hot lunches and throw them out, only to give us a cold cheese sandwich and water like some schools in the US have been doing. But this does not mean that we faced no negative consequences. Our lunch number monitor, who was there to help each child remember their lunch number and ensure

that high schoolers actually typed it in, would remind us each day that we had a low balance, or that we owed money. This was never said softly enough to me that my classmates next to me could not hear it, so I was always aware that my classmates knew about my family's money troubles. Regardless, my mom and stepdad worked hard to pay that debt off over the summer so we could start my senior year with a fresh slate.

Unfortunately, my senior year was another financially rough year for my family, and actually was worse than the year before. My mother and I are both chronically ill, my sisters were in sports, and my mom had to get a different vehicle after I rolled mine so I could have hers. On top of our usual living expenses, the full price cost of 15 lunches each week was adding up quickly. But despite this, free and reduced lunch is based on gross income compared to number of people in the household. Since we had enough to go around by their standards, there was nothing our family could do to catch up. Groceries in a small town are just as expensive as paying for school lunch, so we weren't going to be able to just take bagged lunch to make up for it, and we drove 15 minutes to school each day so gas costs added up too. Four days before I was to walk across the stage and graduate with high honors, a 3.98 GPA, a 30 on my ACT, and 15 college credits on my transcript, my principal stopped me in the hallway at school. If I didn't bring a \$700 check to school the next day at graduation rehearsal, I simply wouldn't be walking that Sunday. Never mind that I had no disciplinary problems, worked hard, did speech and theatre for five years, and was an exemplary student. Because my family was in a hard spot financially, I would be publicly humiliated for it. In a class of 16, in a small town of about 1,000, word spreads, people talk, and it would have been obvious that I was missing.

I say all of this to say that it is never okay, right, fair, or justified to publicly identify or humiliate a child, adolescent, or teen because of their family's financial situation. Children in school are not responsible for their family's finances and are equally not responsible for paying for their school lunch accounts, especially if they aren't even old enough to have a job. Adding to that, food waste is an epidemic in this country, and by throwing away a perfectly good meal because a child's parent or guardian owes a couple dollars to the school, we contribute to that problem in a horrific way. Considering the aspect of requiring children to work around the school to pay off lunch debt, that could be considered indentured servitude, and child slave labor isn't something any school should be participating in. Finally, the part about preventing children from participating in any extracurriculars and ceremonies with lunch debt. Participating in speech and theatre is what helped me find my friends, find a sense of belonging, and figure out who I wanted to be. If I had been blocked from that because of my family's financial difficulties, who knows how different my school experience would have been or how different I would be.

HB 1494 is incredibly important because it protects students from having to bear the social brunt of their caregiver's finances. It bars schools from enacting policies that embarrass, humiliate, and demean students from ages 5 to 19, and gives students from all backgrounds the chance to eat a nice warm meal at school free of worry or fear. I fully support HB 1494 and urge this committee to give a Do Pass recommendation.

Thank you Chairman Elkin and Members of the Committee,

Heather Gades, Miss Bonanzaville 2023