

**Testimony in Support of HB 1494 - Senate Education Committee
North Dakota United
68th Legislative Session
March 14, 2023**

Chairman Elkin and members of the Senate Education Committee, for the record my name is Bob Marthaller, representing North Dakota United.

Chairman Elkin, North Dakota United is pleased to provide testimony in support of HB 1494. Children should never be shamed because they are unable to pay for their school lunch. We have learned that some children, to avoid being shamed have skipped lunch and other meals and we know that research tells us that a hungry child is a child not ready to learn.

Lunch debt is not the fault of the child and children do not have the responsibility to ensure they have enough funds in their lunch account to pay for meals. That responsibility lies with the parents or the child's guardians. Parents or guardians are sometimes unable to pay for school lunch for a variety of reasons, some legitimate and some perhaps not. Again, not the fault of the child.

Chairman Elkin and members of the committee a child should never be denied a meal or served an alternative meal because the child's lunch account is unpaid.

A child receiving a free or reduced cost meal should never, in any way, be singled out for receiving a free meal because of an unpaid lunch account balance.

A child should never be limited or prevented from participating in school activities, graduation, clubs, athletics, or other extracurricular or educational activities because of an unpaid student lunch account balance.

A child should never be required to perform work to pay off a school lunch debt.

Passage of HB 1494 will help to prevent these actions from happening and will protect children from unnecessary shaming and ridicule.

North Dakota United realizes that school debt related to unpaid lunch accounts could become a significant challenge and expense to a school district. Parents or guardians should certainly be discreetly contacted by school officials to arrange to pay for meals . . . but never at the cost of a child's dignity or self-esteem. My best guess is that most school districts have related policy. Those that don't should be required to develop policy and those districts that have policy should evaluate and revise their policy requirements to meet the intent of HB 1494.

Chairman Elkin, North Dakota United also supports a companion bill, HB 1491, which you will be hearing tomorrow, that provides a \$6,000,000 appropriation to the ND Department of Public Instruction for the purpose of providing grants to school districts to defray the expenses of providing free lunch for students.

Chairman Elkin, North Dakota United fully supports the amendments to HB 1494 offered by Rep. Ista and we encourage adoption of the amendments.

Chairman Elkin, and members of the committee, it is for these reasons that North Dakota United supports the passage of HB 1494, as amended (23.0879.04001) and urges the Senate Education Committee to give a unanimous Do Pass recommendation.

Thank you and that concludes my testimony.