

Testimony Regarding School Meal Debt
Legislative Audit and Fiscal Review Committee
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Lynelle Johnson
Director of Child Nutrition and Food Distribution Programs
North Dakota Department of Public Instruction

Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to present information on student meal debt in North Dakota's schools. This testimony is intended to share the results from the most recent school meal debt survey

In July 2026, NDDPI distributed a survey to all 192 sponsors that participate in the National School Lunch program, requesting each district's meal debt balance as of June 30, 2026. This collection point aligns with the end of the fiscal year, allowing for consistent comparison across districts. To ensure strong participation, we issued three follow-up reminders to districts that had not yet responded.

Approximately 30 of the sponsors operate under a federal provision model in which all meals are provided at no cost to students. These schools generally do not carry meal debt, and while a few provision schools responded voluntarily, they were not required to report. The remaining 162 districts were the primary focus of our data collection. Ultimately, 150 of the 162 districts responded, resulting in a response rate of just over 92 percent. The raw survey data has been submitted to the committee, and I will summarize the key findings here.

Districts were asked to report their total outstanding student meal debt on June 30, 2026, and to indicate whether private or charitable donations, or general fund dollars were used to reduce debt prior to that date. We also requested the dollar amounts associated with any write-offs and the approximate number of students contributing to the total. These questions allowed us to capture both the statewide debt balance and the extent to which districts had already taken steps to pay down debt before the end of the fiscal year.

Based on the responses received, school districts reported a combined statewide meal debt total of \$2,004,485 as of June 30.

Districts reported the following write-offs prior to submitting their final figures:

- Charitable contributions totaling \$45,701 were used to reduce debt prior to June 30th
- General fund dollars totaling \$493,772 were used to pay down debt prior to June 30th
- In total, 21 districts used charitable donations, 23 districts used general fund dollars, and 7 districts used a combination of both.

Regarding school meal debt, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction's role is to ensure that districts communicate their written meal charge policy to parents and staff each school year, and to ensure funds from the non-profit food service account are not used to pay off bad meal debt. Management and collection of meal debt is handled entirely at the local level. Each district determines the most appropriate way to manage meal debt based on its own policies, community relationships, and financial circumstances. As a result, there is no single statewide approach to handling unpaid meal charges.

This concludes my prepared testimony, and I'll stand for any questions.