

January 17, 2023

Dear Members of the Senate Education Finance and Policy Committees,

I am writing today to express support for both SF8 and SF123. These bills provide the funds necessary to address the immediate crisis schools are facing with families unable to afford school meals and the long-term solution to provide no cost breakfast and lunch to all students in Minnesota.

I am a mental health therapist, licensed in both Minnesota and North Dakota. However, I am addressing you today as a former school board member. I just completed my fifth year as a Director on the Moorhead Board of Education and chose not to seek reelection.

I became involved in school meals policies back in 2016 when our district was discussing sending families to collections for overdue school meal fees. I thought about the families already struggling to support their children. And I thought about how devastating it would be – the heartbreak and the trauma – to have that specific debt, the debt for not being able to afford meals for your child, go to a collections agency. After confirming this was not a USDA recommendation, we amended our district policy to stop sending families to collections in 2019.

However, in 2022 the USDA made another policy change. Previously, delinquent debt could be carried forward year-to-year if the district and the family were making good faith efforts working together to resolve the outstanding balance. But now school districts are required to classify delinquent meal debt at the end of the year as "bad debt," and make a transfer from the General Education Fund to cover the debt in the Food Service Fund -- regardless of the total account balance in the Food Service Fund. So although Moorhead Area Public School District is lucky enough to regularly have a positive balance in the Food Service Fund, our school district is now forced to rob the General Education Fund – money that is desperately needed to educate general and special education students – just to cover unpaid school meal debt. This is the impossible situation school districts are contending with as they work to provide food to our students.

Additionally, the research on the impacts of food insecurity and hunger on students' ability to learn is extensive and concrete. It covers everything from the science of how hunger impacts concentration; evidence that negative academic and psychosocial outcomes are associated with family-level food insufficiency; to how food insecurity affects students' perception of the school climate, which affects academic outcomes, among other things.

Unfortunately, today one-in-four food-insecure students in Minnesota come from a household that does not qualify for the Free or Reduced-Price School Meals program. By supporting Hunger Free Schools, we can permanently eliminate hunger in Minnesota classrooms, remove the stigma of food insecurity, and reduce the strain of paperwork for schools and families.

I hope the students, families, and school districts of Minnesota can count on your support for SF8 and SF123.

Sincerely,

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