

February 11, 2025

Minnesota Senate  
Education Finance Committee  
RE: Free School Meals Update

Dear Chair Kunesh and Members of the Education Finance Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the critical issue of MN Free School Meals. My name is Genevieve Vavreck, founder of MN Plant-Based Kids, a grassroots coalition dedicated to gaining state-wide access to school meals for students who cannot or will not eat animal products served at school because of health, religion, climate activism, ethical beliefs, etc. Most importantly, I am a stay at home mom.

As someone who knows firsthand the feeling of entering my lunch PIN only to be told my account is empty and having my lunch tray taken away, I commend the work done by this committee to launch Free School Meals. My lunch money check was regularly deposited into the account of a student whose last name matched my mother's. It was a painful reminder of my parents' divorce, while I went a week without lunch as the issue was slowly resolved. Therefore, it is important to me that my family participates to support Free School Meals because no student should experience the stress and negative feelings of an empty lunch account.

In August 2023, with my oldest entering Kindergarten, we checked the school lunch menu fully expecting plant-based options, like any restaurant has these days, only to find none. We contacted the school culinary department asking how to opt-in to plant-based school meals only to be told we couldn't. When asking for a plant-based meal the school did not help us or give us the special diet form. During a kindergarten welcome event, I asked a school nurse para where to record my child's dietary restrictions and we told that they do in-fact have plant-based meals including dairy-free milk. I was redirected back to the person we had already been in contact with. Many emails to many school officials later, I finally had the form that needed to be signed by a doctor, but the pediatrician was booked out for six months. My child did not receive free school meals until March 2024 because of the long and difficult process.

Please consider passing legislation that Illinois already has, requiring school districts to offer plant-based meal options upon request. Free School Meals is an amazing program, but the barriers to entry are difficult and hard to navigate for students who cannot eat animal products. Many in our coalition still do not have access to Free School Meals as of February 2025. For students needing plant-based options, for reasons other than health disabilities, the program can feel completely inaccessible.

With many populations having high rates of lactose intolerance, we need to make it easier to have dairy-free meals and milk. With many young people concerned about climate, we need to make it easier to eat plant-based for the planet. With many restrictions on animal products for many religions, we need to make it easier to get plant-based school meals to uphold our freedom of religion. With medical data privacy concerns, we need access to school meals without a HIPAA waiver. With the healthcare crisis, we need access to plant-based school meals that lower risk of diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and obesity. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Genevieve Vavreck  
Executive Director & Founder  
MN Plant-Based Kids

P.S. Please see this list of why 600+  
Minnesotans THANK YOU for supporting  
expanding Free School Meals to include  
plant-based school meal option.

