



MICHIGAN

September 19, 2023

Senate Education Committee
Michigan State Senate
Room 1100, Binsfeld Office Building
201 Townsend Street
Lansing, MI 48933

RE: SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE TESTIMONY - SB 500

Good afternoon, Chair Polehanki and members of the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Senate Education Committee today. My name is Bernadette Downey and I serve as Associate Director of Government Relations & Advocacy for Share Our Strength, a national nonprofit that leads the No Kid Hungry Michigan campaign. I am here today to register our support for Senate Bill 500, which would permanently ensure access to no-cost healthy school meals for all of Michigan's public-school students.

In Michigan, the No Kid Hungry Michigan campaign works with the Michigan Department of Education, with school districts and individual schools, and with community organizations to identify and eliminate the barriers that may prevent children and families from accessing healthy and nutritious meals. Approximately, 1 in 8 children in Michigan could face food insecurity this year, and no-cost school meals play a critical role in reducing food insecurity for children and Michigan families.

School meals remove pressure from family budgets and help families to put food on the table every day. School meals are themselves the healthiest meals that children receive each day, directly supporting their food and nutrition security.¹ Research has shown that healthy school meals for all specifically can reduce stigma², encouraging more students to take advantage of the benefits of school meals, increase attendance³, decrease behavioral problems⁴, boost performance in the classroom⁵, promote good nutrition⁶, and reduce food insecurity.⁷ This can have a powerful impact on children's health and future outcomes. Parents also strongly support healthy school meals for all because it saves them time, money, and stress.⁸ The permanent adoption of healthy school meals for all will support Michigan families and ensure that each of Michigan's Pre-K through grade 12 students have the nutrition they need to grow, learn, and thrive.

This summer, the Legislature made the wise investment to fund healthy school meals for all this school year in the FY2024 budget. By expanding eligibility for no-cost school meals, we estimate more than 18 million additional meals will be served in schools resulting in a projected increase of \$45 million in federal funds for school meals programs.

This increase in resources matters. School nutrition departments must maintain their own budgets and generate the revenue needed to buy nutritious food and pay staff to prepare



appealing meals. Adequate and predictable funding is critical to a well-run school nutrition department that meets the needs of its students, especially considering the long lead time needed for vendor contracts. Unpaid meal debt, when families are unable to pay for meals already taken, cuts into thin margins. Permanent healthy school meals for all will support school nutrition budgets by eliminating unpaid meal debt as well as provide the stability needed for planning and communicating with families. Leaving school meals for all as an annual budget decision would be chaotic for school nutrition professionals and confusing for families, which would only add to the challenges schools would face if the policy were not continued each year.

SB 500 would provide permanent, reliable access to nutritious meals, improve the school academic environment, strengthen school nutrition departments, and help address child hunger, particularly among families who are struggling to make ends meet but may not qualify for the federal free and reduced-price meals program as well as eligible students deterred by stigma. Therefore, No Kid Hungry Michigan is pleased to support SB 500 and urges committee members to vote “yes” when this bill is before them.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

¹ Liu, J., Micha, R., Li, Y. & Mozaffarian, D. (2021, April 12). *Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018*. JAMA Netw Open; 4(4):e215262. Retrieved September 18, 2023, from https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2778453?utm_source=For_The_Media&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=ftm_links&utm_term=040921.

² Brown, A. (2017, September 29). *Fighting the stigma of free lunch: Why universal free school lunch is good for students, schools, and families*. Ford Foundation. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://www.fordfoundation.org/news-and-stories/stories/posts/fighting-the-stigma-of-free-lunch-why-universal-free-school-lunch-is-good-for-students-schools-and-families/>

³ Cohen, J. F. W., Hecht, A. A., McLoughlin, G. M., Turner, L., & Schwartz, M. B. (2021, March 11). *Universal School meals and associations with student participation, attendance, academic performance, Diet Quality, food security, and body mass index: A systematic review*. MDPI. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://www.mdpi.com/2072-6643/13/3/911>

⁴ Gordon, N. E., & Ruffini, K. J. (2018, September 10). *School Nutrition and student discipline: Effects of schoolwide free meals*. NBER. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://www.nber.org/papers/w24986>

⁵ *2020 rapid health impact assessment on USDA proposed changes to School Nutrition Standards*. Healthy Eating Research. (2023, February 13). Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://healthyeatingresearch.org/research/rapid-health-impact-assessment-on-usda-proposed-changes-to-school-nutrition-standards/>

⁶ *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study*. Food and Nutrition Service U.S. Department of Agriculture. (n.d.). Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-nutrition-and-meal-cost-study>

⁷ Huang J, B. E. (n.d.). *Low-income children's participation in the National School Lunch Program and household food insufficiency*. Social science & medicine (1982). Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26722983/>

⁸ Cohen JFW, Gosliner W, Polacsek M, Hecht CE, Hecht K, Read M, Olarte DO, Chapman L, Patel AI, Schwartz MB, Turner L, Zuercher MD, Ritchie LD. (2023 September). *Implementation of Universal School Meals during COVID-19 and beyond: School Food Authority and Parent Perspectives*. Share Our Strength Report.