

**Sponsor Testimony**  
**Senate Bill 172**  
**Senate Education Committee**  
**Chair, Senator Peggy Lehner**  
**September 20, 2017**

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Lehner, Vice-Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Education Committee. Thank you for allowing me to testify on Senate Bill 172, which would establish the Hunger-Free Students' Bill of Rights Act to require schools to provide certain services to students who are eligible for free or reduced price meals.

Earlier this year, New Mexico passed legislation that directs schools to work with parents or guardians to pay debts and end practices of lunch-shaming like making students wear hand stamps or wristbands if they cannot pay.<sup>1</sup> The humiliation of children for their inability to pay for school lunches is disgraceful! Cafeteria workers have shared their stories of having to throw away meals, or to provide a cold cheese and bread sandwich if a student is in debt.<sup>2</sup> Rather than allowing them to eat, some cafeteria workers have to stamp children's arms with messages like "I need lunch money."

The Hunger-Free Students' Bill of Rights would apply to all district, charter and STEM schools, and to private schools participating in national school lunch or breakfast program. The bill requires the following:

- Each district or school will have to provide a free meal application to each prospective and enrolled student.
- The homeless education liaison and nutrition department of a district or school will coordinate to ensure that homeless students receive free school meals.
  - According to the Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, Ohio has over 27,000 homeless students, and just over half of these children live outside the cities.<sup>3</sup> We need to ensure, at the very least, that these vulnerable kids feel safe and supported at school.
- Schools and districts will provide meals regardless of a student's inability to pay. This means a student can't be forced to throw away their meal for their inability to pay.
- Instead of burdening and stigmatizing the student, as is often the current practice, schools and districts will have to take action to engage parents and guardians, determine a child's

1. <https://www.nmlegis.gov/Legislation/Legislation?Chamber=S&LegType=B&LegNo=374&year=17>
2. <http://www.providencejournal.com/news/20170427/in-debt-at-school-you-get-cheese-sandwich>;  
<http://abcnews.go.com/US/cafeteria-worker-quits-forced-hot-lunch-student-unpaid/story?id=42236158>
3. <http://www.icphusa.org/national/ohio-27000-homeless-students-just-half-outside-cities/>

eligibility for free lunches, and figure out if there are underlying problems contributing to the child's inability to pay.

- This means the school has to communicate about a student's meal debt with her parents, not the student.
- This brings me to the "shaming" that has been occurring in schools. The bill would prohibit a school from stigmatizing a student's inability to pay, including hand stamps, wristbands, or requiring the student to reimburse the school through chores.

New York, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia have introduced similar legislation, in addition to New Mexico passing it. Members of this committee are well aware that hungry children can't learn. Our kids not only deserve to eat, but also don't deserve to be embarrassed for experiencing poverty or hunger. Shaming kids for circumstances beyond their control is cruel.

Chairwoman Lehner and members of the committee, I appreciate your attention to this important matter. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

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2. <http://www.providencejournal.com/news/20170427/in-debt-at-school-you-get-cheese-sandwich>;  
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