



## **Senate Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education**

### **Testimony in Support of Legislation to Improve School Breakfast**

**May 15, 2019**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of strong, modernized school breakfast programs. My name is Eleni Towns and I am a Senior Manager for Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry campaign.

Share Our Strength is a national nonprofit committed to ending hunger and poverty. Through the No Kid Hungry campaign, we work to end hunger and food insecurity in America by connecting children to the federal nutrition programs, like school breakfast, that make sure they get the healthy food they need every day. In addition to our grant-making in all 50 states, we also work with schools, governors, state legislators and nonprofits to identify best practices and provide technical assistance. In Ohio, we are proud to provide funding to schools and districts to strengthen their breakfast participation.

Share Our Strength knows the power of school meals to end childhood hunger and strongly supports the proposal to have high-poverty schools serve school breakfast during the school day.

School breakfast is an essential school supply. Research shows that when kids start the day with a healthy meal, it can impact test scores, attendance rates, and classroom behavior as well as long-term health and eating habits.

Breakfast is especially important for kids who are at risk of hunger. An estimated 510,000 children in Ohio today live in families that struggle to afford enough food for everyone. Even more live in families on the brink, with enough today but only one financial emergency – an unexpected illness, a car repair or broken water heater – away from hunger.

Studies have linked important education outcomes to breakfast programs served within the school day. In 2013, through a study completed by Deloitte for Share Our Strength, we found that on average strong participation in school breakfast reduced classroom absenteeism by 1.5 days per child and connected to 17.5 percent increase in math scores on standardized tests. Breakfast programs that were offered during the school day are linked to gradual decreases in

disciplinary referrals and calmer classrooms, and improved student behavior reflected in feedback from teachers and principals.

School breakfast, however, is seriously under-utilized in Ohio. The state ranks just 27<sup>th</sup> in the nation in successfully connecting students to the free and reduced-price school breakfast meals, meaning there are 498,475 students who are eligible for school breakfast assistance that are missing out. Ohio holds the 8<sup>th</sup> largest gap in the country in terms of students who eat school lunch but are missing out on school breakfast.

Unlike the school lunch program that is embedded into the school day and reaches a larger portion of eligible children, the School Breakfast Program is traditionally served in the cafeteria before the school day starts.

Many families are dependent on school buses and public transportation, which makes it difficult for kids to get to school with enough time to stand in line and sit down with a tray before the school day starts. Further, students who arrive and eat school breakfast before the start of the school day face additional stigma from their peers.

Around the country and Ohio, more schools have recognized these challenges and looked for ways to make breakfast more inclusive by including the meal as part of the school day and providing a broader array of serving methods that remove transportation challenges and shame.

While there has been important progress in Ohio, the average increase in school breakfast participation has not matched the need in Ohio or the national growth in participation. Over the last five federal fiscal years, the national increase in School Breakfast Program was 8.8%. However, in Ohio it was only 2.9%. Neighboring states have drastically outpaced Ohio. In Pennsylvania during the same period school breakfast participation increased by 26%. In West Virginia the growth was 27.5%, and in Kentucky 18.9%.

This is a problem with a solution. Supporting smart policies to modernize the school breakfast program, would position Ohio to be a national leader and has the potential to ensure 42,550 students can access the program.

We know legislation can be an important tool for change. The states that first passed legislation to ensure kids have access to breakfast after the school bell rings now have the highest performing breakfast programs in the country.

Nevada was an early adopter and is a strong example. After the state passed a requirement that high-need schools serve breakfast after the first bell rings, breakfast participation doubled in its qualifying schools. The state's national ranking jumped from 25<sup>th</sup> in the nation to 7<sup>th</sup> after one year of implementation. The state's return on its investment more than doubled initial projections. For every \$1 in state monies invested to support the legislation, the program generated \$8 in federal school breakfast reimbursement.

Early successes with breakfast legislation have led many more states to take action. In fact, five of the states with the largest numbers of students missing school breakfast compared to school lunch have taken recent statewide action to pass legislation and/or allocate state funds to dramatically decrease the number of students missing out on school breakfast. If Ohio does not take action it may fall even further behind.

The legislation included in the Amended Substitute House Bill 166 would provide needed flexibility to each Ohio school to develop a breakfast program that suits all of its students, while at the same time developing a strong standard to ensure Ohio's children have the nutrition they need to succeed at school. Schools where at least half of the student population qualifies for reduced or free meals based on household income, would be required to submit a breakfast improvement plan to the Ohio Department of Education if their breakfast participation rate does not meet or exceed 70%, the national participation benchmark used in states and communities across the country. We believe this effort can ensure each school develops a strategy to improve participation in a way that works best for their building, taking into consideration the unique needs and preferences of their students, their morning routines, bus schedules, and other dynamics that impact a student's ability to participate in the program.

The legislation would also require the Ohio Department of Education to notify schools if they are not meeting the 70% participation threshold, to publish breakfast and participation data on their website so that schools, districts, and families can better understand how the programs are performing and identify ways in which they can support improvements. Additionally, this body would be notified through the creation of a breakfast report that would document best practices in increasing breakfast participation. We appreciate that the legislation includes a three-year roll out, first focusing on schools with the highest needs.

Through Share Our Strength's analysis of Ohio's October 2018 school breakfast participation data, we believe 740 schools and 42,550 students could benefit from this legislation. We have included our analysis of the impact by Senate district at the end of this testimony.

School breakfast is a game-changer for students, families, and the bottom line for a district's school nutrition department. School breakfast is a simple, cost-effective way to fight hunger, improve educational outcomes, leverage new federal dollars, and help students start the day on a more equal footing.

This approach works in rural and suburban communities across states like West Virginia, Colorado, and Illinois, and it can be successful no matter the school district size.

We believe Ohio will make a meaningful impact on its students' outcomes by ensuring more students are able to start the day with the healthy food they need to learn.

I thank the Committee for taking the time to focus on this important issue and I urge you to make school breakfast a priority by supporting the breakfast legislation as passed by the House in Amended Substitute House Bill 166.

## NKH Ohio: Legislation-Affected Schools by Senate District

*Analysis excludes schools known to be nonpublic schools and schools that did not match to a legislative district.*

Senate District	Schools 70%+ eligibility & below guidepost		Schools 60%+ eligibility & below guidepost		Schools 50%+ eligibility & below guidepost	
	# of Schools	Breakfast Gap	# of Schools	Breakfast Gap	# of Schools	Breakfast Gap
1	2	16	3	63	12	499
2	7	366	9	538	11	702
3	14	1,563	16	1,658	24	2,373
4	8	1,084	11	1,411	13	1,750
5	22	1,206	23	1,213	26	1,263
6	2	40	5	199	8	516
7	4	67	5	78	5	78
8	8	423	16	1,182	21	1,615
9	19	1,427	21	1,541	25	1,734
10	14	969	15	1,002	20	1,281
11	45	2,529	53	3,197	57	3,456
12	5	393	7	475	13	876
13	7	538	10	693	20	1,386
14	9	301	13	432	23	745
15	29	931	36	1,137	38	1,138
16	7	511	14	925	16	1,041
17	11	479	17	836	25	1,195
18	1	3	2	6	2	6
19	12	660	14	789	17	893
20	4	325	8	829	15	1,285
21	47	1,483	57	2,205	59	2,319
22	4	199	6	243	11	509
23	22	1,247	27	1,367	38	2,123
24	0	0	0	0	1	148
25	28	1,826	35	2,174	38	2,293
26	6	126	10	750	17	1,063
27	1	219	1	219	7	506
28	22	1,783	25	2,167	32	3,085
29	13	828	17	1,008	20	1,300
30	2	226	2	226	12	430
31	6	54	10	305	18	419
32	9	523	15	857	29	1,718
33	22	1,038	25	1,268	36	1,925

*Senate district was determined using each site's address as published in Ohio's school directory from ODE. The addresses were then looked up using an API openstates.org to determine the site's Senate district. Note: approximately 16% of sites did not match to an address in the school directory. For these sites, a Google API was used to look up the site address using the site name and sponsor name, which may not be perfectly reliable. If this lookup was unsuccessful, the sites were excluded from this analysis.*