

Alexis Weber

Food Service Director – Austintown Local Schools

Mahoning County

Chairman Edwards, Vice Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeny and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to give this testimony on the importance of no-cost, healthy school meals for all of Ohio's students. I testified last week to the House Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education, and I am honored to be here today to present again to you. My name is Alexis Weber, I am a Registered Dietitian, a School Nutrition Specialist, and I am currently the Food Service Director for Austintown Local Schools in Mahoning County, District 58.

I have had the privilege to serve nearly 3.5 million school meals to Ohio students over the last 6 years. Please hear my voice as an echo from my students and all students from our state. School meals are a cornerstone to our primary and secondary school structure, but there has been little change to the structure of meal benefits since they were instituted by the Child Nutrition Act of 1966. Currently, the federal government fiscally supports free and reduced-price benefits, but the state of Ohio does not share in this responsibility. A few generations ago, the program parameters were appropriate, however, today our demographics are much different and there is a defined gap of students who miss the opportunity for benefits – the rich don't make enough to be rich, and the poor make too much to be poor. This is the gap that Ohio can fill in.

Our movement is the voice for these kids. We are not your Ohio K-12 schools asking for more money, we represent the families that unfortunately fall within the gap of not qualifying for federal meal benefits. With appropriate state funding, to pick up where the federal funding falls short, school food service departments in our urban cities and rural counties could offer breakfast and lunch at no cost to all their students, eliminating all the stigma that has perpetuated for decades around school meal benefits.

After enduring the pandemic, many of us are grateful our lives have returned to business as usual. But looking back, we learned something great through that time. During the 2021-2022 school year, our nation supported no-cost meals for each student in America. In essence, the federal government funded a "research study" or "pilot plan" for us all to experience feeding our students without the burden of how to pay for them. More kids were fed, more minds were fueled, and the students had a more positive school experience. We already know, with data, the number of students that would eat school meals if the opportunity was available at no cost.

Last year, when most institutions were back to in-person learning, not every student participated in breakfast or lunch, but those that were hungry had the chance to eat. In my district, I served about 20% more reduced-price or full pay students than prior to the pandemic. That's why we're here; these are the students that need this opportunity while they are at school.

The major overhaul of school meal nutrition regulations, initiated by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, revamped the composition of school meals, offering more balanced whole-grain and protein-based entrees, a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, and milk. Research shows that school lunches are more nutrient dense than meals packed from home, and for some students it is the most nutritious meal in their day.

School meals for all brings benefits that reach far beyond the lunchroom. School meals are linked to better educational outcomes, test scores, and student success into adulthood. It eases the burden of busy working families knowing their student could enjoy a warm lunch during the school day, and 87% of surveyed Ohioans, your constituents, agreed that school meals should be provided to all students at no cost. It creates more jobs for Ohio's farmers, especially dairy, cheese, egg, and corn producers for which we are nationally ranked. Other states that have passed legislation to fully support school meals for all could be relying on Ohio farmers for these essential ingredients and Ohio should do the same, ensuring our farmers produce foods that end up right here on our students' lunch trays.

We know that sometimes the price tag can be a shock when you first read it. But price tags become more palatable and even sensible when you see the value of what you're purchasing. Just like textbooks, chromebooks, and transportation, school meals are essential for our students' success. We ask for your consideration in finding a way to keep our kids fed. We hope you can see the value of investing in our Ohio students now and for generations to come.

Thank you for your time today.