

Good Afternoon, my name is Tiffany McCleese. I am the Child Nutrition Director for West Clermont Local School District and the Immediate-Past President for the School Nutrition Association of Ohio. SNA of Ohio is a state affiliate of the School Nutrition Association, a national, nonprofit professional organization representing more than 55,000 members. SNA Ohio has been advocating, quality and acceptance of school nutrition programs as an integral part of education since 1968. The Ohio Association strives to see that all Ohio students have access to healthy school meals and nutrition education. A volunteer-based organization, SNA of Ohio is a community of professionals focused and committed to making a difference in the lives of the students we serve.

This is the First time SNA of Ohio is testifying on the budget, please know that it is because of; the importance and urgency of making sure our students do not go hungry in schools. Please allow me the opportunity to introduce a few of my fellow school nutrition professionals:

- Karah Smith, Lancaster City Schools
- Chef Bill Bailey, Cuyahoga Falls
- Alexis Weber, Austintown Local Schools
- Chris Smith, Chesapeake Union Schools
- Deanne Kelbley, Amherst Exempted Village Schools (Legislative Chair)
- Stacy Bettis, Stark County ESC (East Central Regional Director)
- Daryn Guarino, Alexander Local Schools

I am confident in stating that every nutrition professional in the state would be here today if they could.

1 in 6 kids (as many as 1 in 4 kids - in certain counties), lives in a household that faces hunger; and 1 in 3 of those kids whose families face hunger do not qualify for free or reduced school meals. The importance of school meals is to support students learning. We are working to provide sustenance so that our students, Ohio's children, the future of Ohio, are ready and able to learn. It is difficult to do this when so many students are distracted by rumbling tummies. School meals have proven to help children succeed in school. Good nutrition is linked to better educational outcomes. This includes improved: test scores, academics, attendance, and graduation rates. We also see reduced behavioral occurrences when students have food in their bellies.

School Nutrition professionals play an integral part in helping to ensure our students receive all the tools necessary for them to succeed in their educational endeavors. Our primary focus is on supporting the student education process. We work diligently to ensure students receive nutritious foods that are appealing. School meals are more nutrient dense than lunches brought from home. In my district, all schools have multiple fresh fruit and vegetable offerings each day. Many of those are procured from farmers within 150 miles of West Clermont. Not to mention, the economic benefit that universal school meals has on our agricultural community, we endeavor to buy local as much as we can and from Ohio companies.... Just this fall, my district engaged in a 'Local Menu Takeover' in which we featured multiple menu days comprised of local products purchased from local farms and manufacturers. Through the years, we have worked with many local farms to provide meals such as scratch made beef stew and buffalo chicken wings.

All of this culminates in that we do not want 'categories' of kids in the class room, some kids are free, some reduced, and some paid. That creates stigma, not only in the lunchroom, which should be a place where all kids come together as a community but throughout every area of a child's school experience. Stigma causes even those eligible free or reduced priced meals not to eat. I have seen this first hand in my district. Some families have refused to apply, knowing they DO qualify, stating it was 'a pride' thing, while other families who want the benefits, have missed the 'reduced' qualification by as little as \$50.00. When a child does not qualify or does qualify but their parents refuse to apply free and reduced benefits, the nutrition professionals are placed in the difficult place of having to, be debt collectors. This is in total opposition of our main goal, which is feeding our students. Not only does it damage the parent relationship, it also causes embarrassment and frustration for our students.

You will hear from the other speakers that school meal debt is very high. However, school meal debt is one piece of the larger problem... and that is, "we don't provide school meals to all students although we provide desks, tables, chairs, textbooks, transportation, etc. School meals are an essential part of the student education and a basic need and should be included in that list. Without food and water, we cannot live. We cannot grow. We cannot thrive.

In a survey done by Baldwin Wallace University of over 1,000 parents of school-aged kids, 87% of respondents agreed that school meals should be provided at no cost to all students regardless of the student's ability to pay. As nutrition professionals, teachers, staff, and superintendents, we agree.

When you have stronger, smarter, healthier kids, you have a stronger, smarter, healthier, more economically competitive state. This is good for Ohio.