

My name is Daryn Guarino. I am the Director of Food and Nutrition for the Alexander Local School District in Albany Ohio. Thank you for letting me speak today.

In my role as Director of Food and Nutrition for a Pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade school district, I create recipes, build menus, and serve food to school children ages 4-18. Except on Wednesdays. On Wednesdays, I become a debt collections agent and I chase the parents of families that have begun to accumulate lunch debt. I contact more than 250 families each week, representing more than 1/3 of our student population, with new names getting added each week. Emails go to families that owe up to \$50. Letters go to those owing more than \$100. Phone calls go to those over \$150. At -\$190, I do everything in my power to contact the parents. I send notes home with the kids. I send notes home with the bus-drivers. I will call and email both parents at home and at work. I will hand-deliver notices to their homes. I don't do this because I want to be district collections agent of the year, I do this because at -\$200 my cash registers will reject this student. The student will not be allowed to make any transactions at all. No lunch, no food, nothing, their account will be completely shut down.

My staff and I watch in horror as a student's account starts getting close to the hard-stop. Lunch is the same price every day, so we know exactly when their shut-down will happen. The stress this causes for my staff clouds their days. Most of them would rather call in sick than be the one to tell the student that they do not get to eat today, so now I do it for all of them. I'm as kind and loving as I can be when I guide them out of the lunch line. We don't shame them as it isn't their fault, but everybody knows what is happening. And each day afterward, the student will quietly approach a register operator and ask if they can eat today and slink away when they cannot. Eventually they stop coming to lunch altogether. It's heart-wrenching and it hurts everyone involved.

Some people may say, "Well that's too bad, everybody has to pay their own way." I am not here to debate that with you. I just want you to know that while you envision boldly speaking those righteous words into the face of a deadbeat adult, the last person I had to say them to was a 6 year old girl. She cried if it makes you feel better, but I wanted to quit my job.

Fortunately, my district has a program that allows me to feed the kids that can no longer get in the lunch line. My district also picks up the cost of breakfast for all students which means that everyone has access to a free breakfast every day. Many districts cannot afford to be as generous which means that the children suffer. Study after study shows that kids who eat breakfast and lunch do better in school. We know that when you have an empty belly, the only thing you can think about is filling it. We demand kids be in school, away from their parents, for six hours per day and then, for some reason, we refuse to feed them while they are there.

I love children. I love their energy and their smiling faces. I love watching them do a happy dance because today is their most favorite lunch. My staff and I live to feed these kids, not to deny them. We can't be caring people proving great food AND heart-hearted debt collectors at the same time.

The COVID era showed us that we could afford universal free school meals for all. Without the many COVID restrictions to deal with, the program would likely cost less today than it did back then.

Who is more worthy than our children? I urge you to support free school meals for all students in Ohio.

Thank you for your time.