



## Testimony Before the Senate Finance Committee – House Bill 33

May 31, 2023

Chair Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, and Ranking Member Sykes, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak before the committee on House Bill 33.

My name is Katherine Ungar, and I am a Senior Policy Associate for the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio. We lead the [Hunger-Free Schools Ohio Coalition](#), a coalition of over 50 organizations across the state, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, Coalition of Rural and Appalachian Schools, School Nurses Association, multiple nonprofit anti-hunger organizations, small businesses, and the School Nutrition Association of Ohio. **We are committed to one simple goal: ensuring no child goes hungry at school.** As you know, schools are pillars of their communities and for many children, school is the only place that some may eat a nutritious meal.

I am testifying today to ask you to include funding in our state budget to supplement the amount of money we receive from the federal government to ensure that all students in Ohio have access to school meals. Our budget reflects our values as Ohioans. What do we value if we do not stand for feeding our children?

One in 6 and as many as 1 in 4 children in some of our counties live in a household facing food insecurity, and what's worse—1 in 3 of those children facing hunger does not qualify for free or reduced priced meals through the federal government. The current eligibility threshold to qualify for free or reduced priced meals is 185% of the FPL, or a mere \$51,000 income for a family of 4. There are approximately 500,000 children who live in households that make between \$51,000 and \$75,000, the living wage for a family of 4 in Ohio. There are an estimated 500,000 children whose families who earn too much to be eligible for reduced lunch, but still do not earn a living wage that would cover all their basic needs. These are the hard-working families struggling to pay rent, to make ends meet, and the families who fill out the application only to learn they make too much to qualify.

So, what happens? Nutrition providers, whose main goal is simply to feed children, are put in the difficult position of having to collect school meal debt and balance their budgets, making impossible decisions about . And in many of our districts, students who reach a debt level as determined by that district are denied the meal. Further, in some districts, they are denied the opportunity to walk at high school graduation, to participate in extracurriculars, and even worse, they are humiliated in front of their friends.



Let me emphasize this point : in some districts, a KINDERGARTENER who has accrued school meal debt may go down the school lunch line with their hot meal, only to find out at the point of sale system that they have reached the debt threshold, have their hot meal thrown in the trash, and given an “alternate” lunch which consists of a paper bagged lunch with a cheese or peanut butter sandwich. Imagine what that must feel like for that child... and for that nutrition provider. Many cafeteria workers making minimum wage will take money out of their pockets to delay having to deny a student a meal as long as possible.

Now, I want to pause here and talk about the heroes that our food services staff are. School meals have come a long way since we were all in school. Providers are focused on and dedicated to making creative lunches that include fruits and vegetables, healthy proteins, and ones that inspire students to try new foods. They love to talk to the students about where their food comes from, particularly the produce locally sourced from Ohio farmers.

But the part that nutrition services directors tell me repeatedly that they dread, and in fact, one told me makes him seriously consider quitting the job he loves whenever he must do it, is debt collections. Let me give a little snapshot of the state of school meal debt in Ohio right now:

Lancaster City Schools- \$42,000 in debt  
Westerville City Schools- \$40,000 in debt  
North Ridgeville- \$14,000  
Washington Local Schools- \$38,000  
Pickerington Local Schools- \$46,508  
Alexander Local- \$12,000

This is a problem throughout our state. But school meal debt is not the problem, it is a symptom of the larger problem that we do not provide school meal access to every student. Through federal waivers last school year, all schools were able to serve meals at no cost to all students, removing the stigma of being labeled free or reduced that many low-income students face. Nutrition providers saw the tremendous impact of eliminating these divisions between school children based on income firsthand . Nutrition programs saw more students coming through their lines, they fed more meals to more kids. More kids sat together in the cafeteria to have lunch, improving a sense of community and belonging which is essential to positive school culture and climate. Students in the lunch room should be, just that, students... not a “free” student, or a “reduced” student, or a “paid student”.

What is policymaking for, if we do not use the ample resources at our disposal to, at the very least, ensure no child goes hungry at school? I urge this committee to ensure our budget prioritizes this essential responsibility we have for all Ohio children and ensures all kids have access to at least one nutritious school meal while in school.



We are asking you to include in your version of the budget an amendment SC0505 to ensure that all Ohio students have access to school breakfast. We have the money to do this, we just need your will.

Thank you for your time and for seriously considering this important issue.