Testimony to the Ohio House Education Committee
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Good morning, Chairman Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the committee. My name is Cynthia Rees. I serve as Executive Director of the Council for a Strong Ohio and as a proud member of the Hunger Free Schools Ohio coalition. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today.

The Hunger Free Schools Ohio coalition is a broad based coalition of over 50 organizations across the state, including the Children's Hospital Association, Kroger Co. and CVS Health, as well as many other organizations.

First, I want to commend Governor Mike DeWine for his commitment to Ohio's students through his proposed education budget. I urge the committee to build on this strong foundation by ensuring universal school meals are included in the final budget.

Ohio has made tremendous progress in reducing childhood hunger, thanks to Governor DeWine's leadership. The governor's budget requires that schools participate in a federal school meal program to secure the maximum federal money available. This is why the governor's budget anticipates an increase in federal funding for school meals. The governor's budget includes a waiver for those schools where participation would actually cost them more. We support this language as it will help to feed more children in our schools and the federal government will pay for it.

But we can and should do more.

Too many students still fall through the cracks. Federal meal programs primarily target high-poverty schools, leaving many middle-income families who fall just above the eligibility threshold struggling to afford meals. Worse, stigma discourages eligible children from participating.

Universal school meals eliminate these barriers, ensuring every student eats without stigma and fostering a more inclusive school environment. Studies show that when schools offer free meals to all students, participation rates rise, and students are healthier, more focused, and better prepared to succeed.

This is not just about fairness. It is about results. Well-nourished students perform better academically, with higher test scores, improved attendance, and better behavior. Every

dollar spent on universal meals returns more than two dollars in health and education benefits.

Schools also save up to 67 cents per lunch and 58 cents per breakfast by reducing administrative costs. If we provide textbooks and transportation for all students, why not meals?

Ohioans overwhelmingly support this policy. A recent poll found that 67% of voters, including strong majorities in our most economically disadvantaged counties, favor universal school meals. For working families, this policy could save them $1,000 to $1,200 per child each year, easing financial strain.

Other states are taking action. Last month, Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders of Arkansas signed legislation providing free breakfast for all students regardless of income. And, South Carolina recently expanded access to free school meals and many other states are implementing similar efforts to reach more children with healthy universal school meals.

Governor DeWine's proposed budget makes critical investments in Ohio's students, and we applaud his leadership. By taking the next step and ensuring universal school meals, we can solidify Ohio's reputation as a leader in student well-being. Providing every child with access to nutritious meals will improve academic outcomes, reduce food insecurity, and support working families.

We have made significant progress, but thousands of Ohio students still experience hunger at school. By expanding to universal school meals, we can ensure that no child goes hungry at school. This is about more than just food. It's about Ohio's children, Ohio's future.

I urge the committee to take this next step of ensuring universal school meals are included in the final budget. We look forward to working with the committee on ways to accomplish that.

Thank you.

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