

Testimony to the Ohio House Education Committee
Doug Hale, Superintendent
Chesapeake Union Exempted Village Schools
March 4, 2025

Good afternoon Chairwoman Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the committee. My name is Doug Hale, and I am the superintendent of Chesapeake Union Exempted Village Schools in Lawrence County. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today about the importance of school meals and the need to ensure every child in Ohio has access to the nutrition they need to learn and thrive.

As educators, we see firsthand how hunger impacts our students. A child who is hungry struggles to focus, retain information, and engage in the classroom. School meals are often the most reliable source of nutrition for our students, and that is why it is critical for districts to maximize their participation in federal school meal programs. By fully utilizing the funding available through the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs, we can ensure that more children receive the meals they need without placing additional financial strain on families. This is the first year that Chesapeake has qualified for CEP and even though it helps financially, our district is still using general funds to cover 40% of the food costs. These are funds we could use to develop and enhance other programs that students needed.

Chesapeake, like a lot of rural districts, does not have a talent issue with our kids but has an exposure to new programs and job opportunities that many suburban and urban districts don't have.

I want to thank Governor DeWine for expanding access to school meals in his budget proposal. His leadership in increasing eligibility means that more Ohio students will have access to the nutrition they need to succeed. But we need to build on that progress. No child should go hungry at school because they do not qualify for assistance, and no family should have to worry about affording a basic meal for their child. Before our CEP qualification this school year, our lunch debt was between \$60,000 and \$80,000 each year. All students got breakfast and or lunch whether they could pay or not. Our district made the commitment to our students and families to have a meal each day.

I urge this committee to take the next step and fully fund universal school meals in this budget. This investment will eliminate barriers, reduce stigma, and ensure that every Ohio student has the nutrition they need to focus, grow, and reach their full potential.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to Ohio's students.

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