David Manley

Interested Party testimony – HB 96

Re: Urgent Appeal for Continued Funding for Healthy School Meals for All

Members of the Ohio House Education Committee:

I am writing to express my strong support for expanding no-cost school meal programs. As a dedicated educator at Toledo Public Schools and a Board Member of the American Heart Association of Northwestern Ohio, I have firsthand experience with the profound impact that these programs have on our students' lives.

In 2024, Ohio's food insecurity rate was 11.8% overall and 14.8% for children. Toledo has one of the highest poverty rates in the state, coming in as the city with the 12th highest rate. In Lucas County, 24.2% of children live in poverty. That equates to 104,000 Lucas County children who aren't sure when their next healthy meal will be. While the current system allows schools to offer free and reduced-price meals to income-eligible students, many students facing food insecurity do not receive these meals either because of stigma, application issues, or falling just above the income cutoffs. Schools are in a unique position to support these students. By providing free healthy meals, we're setting students up for success and saving their household an average of $1,000 to $2,000 a school year that can be used to prioritize health at home.

The benefits of universal free school meals are undeniable. It will help end the stigma associated with food insecurity and allow students from low-income families to focus on learning rather than worrying about where their next meal will come from. Studies have shown that well-nourished students perform better academically and are more likely to graduate. By investing in free school meals, we are investing in the future of our children and our community.

It will help alleviate the financial burden on families, allowing them to prioritize other essential needs such as housing and healthcare. Access to healthy food daily helps prevent heart disease, diabetes, and other chronic diseases. Healthy students are better equipped to learn, grow, and thrive.

Free school meals level the playing field, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their socioeconomic background. As food prices rise, it is becoming difficult for families to buy groceries for their homes. If families cannot afford to buy groceries at home, students are coming to school hungry and providing low academic performances. It will not matter if students are in parochial, private or public schools they are facing the same issues. In order for students to meet the academic requirements set by the State of Ohio, they need to have a way to stay nourished to meet the state academic performance goals. Research

consistently indicates a positive correlation between proper nutrition in children and their academic performance, showing that well-nourished students tend to perform better in school, with higher test scores, improved concentration, and reduced absenteeism compared to those experiencing food insecurities and poor dietary habits.

As an educator, I have witnessed firsthand the challenges faced by students who come to school hungry. It is heartbreaking to see children struggling to concentrate or participate in class due to hunger. I truly believe that continuing to invest in our students through providing the Free-lunch program will continue to lighten the burden on students and families who are struggling to put food on the table. It will also ensure that students will get at least two healthy meals a day and increase academic performance and also provide students and families the confidence in Ohio's educational system.

I urge you to prioritize the funding of free school meals. By doing so, we are not only investing in our children's health and well-being, but also in the future of our community.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

David L. Manley

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Board Member, American Heart Association of Northwestern Ohio,

Educator, Toledo Public Schools