



Chair Fowler-Arthur, vice chair Odioso, and ranking member Robinson,

My name is Deacon Nick Bates and I am here today to emphasize the importance of the school meal program in Ohio's schools. The Hunger Network in Ohio (HNO) is a faith-based ministry working to end hunger by addressing the root causes of poverty in Ohio. Our network collaborates with congregations, food ministries, inter-faith partners, non-profits, and other community and social ministry organizations throughout Ohio.

Coming out of the pandemic, I traveled the state – visiting dozens and dozens of congregations on Sunday mornings. I would ask the communities I visited – ‘What worked in 2020?’, despite massive unemployment and economic disruption, hunger remained relatively flat. I wanted to hear from people on the front lines what they saw making an impact. Many thoughts and ideas were shared, but the expansion of school meals was always brought up as an important tool in our fight against hunger – especially childhood hunger. **When breakfast and lunch are accessible, regardless of income, it reduces stigma, reduces bureaucracy, and reduces childhood hunger. To me, less paperwork and more filled bellies is a good day.**

Nearly 20 years ago, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) issued a social statement on education in 2007. In this 72-page statement our denomination emphasizes that our churches and families have a vital role in Christian education, and that, “the ELCA affirms and advocates for the equitable, sufficient, and effective funding of public schools.”<sup>1</sup> Recognizing that every child regardless of race, religion or economic status needs access to a high-quality education to be able to contribute their full selves to the betterment of our shared community. Because of this, addressing the negative impact of hunger and poverty are essential requirements when we consider educational investments.

### **The impacts of childhood hunger and poverty**

Childhood poverty and hunger has long-term negative consequences on our population. The American Psychological Association finds, “living in poverty is associated with differences in structural and functional brain development in children and adolescents.”<sup>2</sup> Simply put, children growing up in poverty are forced to operate under increased and unhealthy amounts of stress related to basic needs. This often leads kids to struggle with learning barriers, life-long health issues, and other hurdles to long-term economic stability and success. Addressing childhood hunger minimizes these negative outcomes.

Hungry kids are more likely to struggle with focus in a classroom. If you have a room of 7-year-olds, and one of them is hungry, it will make it harder for the rest of the room to learn. If children are hungry and are more likely to get sick, then the teacher will have to constantly be

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<sup>1</sup> <https://elcamediaresources.blob.core.windows.net/cdn/wp-content/uploads/EducationSS.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> May 2024, <https://www.apa.org/topics/socioeconomic-status/poverty-hunger-homelessness-children#:~:text=The%20impact%20of%20poverty%20on,du%20to%20local%20funding%20policies.>

going back over material to catch students up instead of moving through the material at a quicker pace.

***Hunger is going up in Ohio.*** The COVID-19 pandemic re-shaped our economy and the disruption has left many struggling in its wake. Ohio saw an 11.3% increase in the rate of food insecurity for Ohioans last year. (11.5% to 12.8%) and the U.S. saw an 8.9% increase (11.2% to 12.2%)<sup>3</sup> in food insecurity. Not only is our food insecurity rate higher than the national average, we are increasing at a faster rate. While food-at-home prices only rose 1.2% last year, the impact of the 5.0% inflation rate in 2023 on food-at-home, and 11.4% in 2022 have a lasting negative impact on our economy, especially for families in lower income brackets.<sup>4</sup>

### **Food Insecurity isn't the stereotype:**

I have led youth groups, soccer teams, Scout groups, and helped with programs at our YMCA. I have interacted with hundreds of neighbors in the Hilltop who are working, volunteering and doing what they can to give their kids a good life and to strengthen our community. However, many of these families have confided in me that – at different times – they were struggling. They turn to food pantries. Sometimes, these temporary moments of food insecurity are solved within a month or two, sometimes food insecurity remains a cloud that overshadows the household month in and month out. Sadly, some of these families might not be below the 185% of the federal poverty level in August and not qualify at that time for free meals. But when seasonal work ends with an early cold snap, or a health concern reduces household income, these families are in need but have often lost access to the meal option at school.

Kids are working hard to learn to read and families are working hard to support them. Growing our support for breakfast and lunch services is a great way for us to have their backs.

### **Food is a necessity of education:**

Full bellies lead to full minds. I have heard many times, committee chairs in this Statehouse make a joke about breaking for lunch, because it's hard to do this work on an empty stomach. Yep. And it's hard for a 7- or 8-year-old to do their work on an empty stomach too. Our school funding formula's attempt to provide for what students need to learn. Computers, desks, books and bus rides are factored in. We don't ask a child if they can afford to drive or take an uber to school. Families have that choice, but the state figures out how to make sure the busses have enough fuel to get the kids to school, let's make sure the kids are fueled up at school too.

I encourage the General Assembly to continue to grow support for school meals in Ohio, because hungry children struggle to learn. Fed children will grow to be the strong community leaders that we need them to be.

Thank you and I'd be happy to answer any questions

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details?pubid=109895>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook/summary-findings>