



State Representative Ismail Mohamed

Chair Fowler-Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Robinson, and Members of the Education Committee, thank you for bringing this legislation to the agenda.

As my joint sponsor mentioned, this bill is an important step towards ensuring that every child in Ohio has access to nutritious meals and essential services in school. No child should be afraid to approach a lunch line for fear of being turned away, called out or otherwise stigmatized for overdue or insufficient lunch balance.

Across the country and in here in Ohio we have seen examples of students being punished in front of their peers for not having enough lunch money. Stories include students being served alternative “brown bag” lunches reserved only for those who couldn’t pay, being physically stamped with the words “I need lunch money”, not being allowed to graduate, and even threatened with removal from their home if they didn’t pay balances. These stories paint a picture of the social and emotional burden we are forcing students to go through to do something so basic and necessary as eat lunch at school. Our bill would address the stigma and allow for any student in need to have the same lunch opportunities as their peers.

According to 2021 data from the Education Data Initiative, the average school meal debt in Ohio was more than \$169. Total state meal debt in the state was listed at \$17.3 million. To give some perspective, this does not even include the roughly 730,000 students who participated in free lunch programs in Ohio during that same year. This issue impacts our students and children across the state, in every district. In some instances, the availability of a stigma-free school lunch can be the difference between parents putting dinner on the table that night, or a student being able to stay awake and engaged in class.

Many of you are likely aware of the links between poor nutrition in children and lasting health problems, learning challenges, delayed cognitive development and an increased risk of obesity. By laying the groundwork to stop lunch shaming tactics and allow for every student to have access to lunch, we are ensuring a more equitable learning environment and future for our children.

This anti-lunch shaming legislation would join that of Maine, New Mexico, Virginia, California, Hawaii, Oregon, Texas, Iowa, Washington, Illinois, New York, and Pennsylvania, who have all passed similar anti-lunch shaming initiatives. House Bill 408 represents a pivotal step in fostering an environment where Ohio’s students are able to reach their full potential regardless of financial

background. I urge your support for this vital legislation and am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you,

Ismail Mohamed

State Representative

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