

Committees

Community Revitalization
Public Safety



Committees:

Children and Human Services
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Chair Fowler-Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Robinson, and Ohio House Education Committee members thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on House Bill 97, legislation that guarantees all Ohio students are provided a meal regardless of their ability to pay for one.

Ohio's future is shaped in our classrooms, where our children's well-being should be prioritized. Yet, the harsh reality is that food insecurity burdens many students' potential, affecting their health, academic success, and overall growth. House Bill 97 seeks to address this pressing issue by requiring public schools to offer meals and related services to all students, eliminating financial barriers and providing the basic nutrition all children need to thrive.

Over 1.6 million Ohioans are food insecure, meaning around 14% of Ohio's population does not have access to adequate nutrition. More than 1 in 6 Ohio children were living in poverty in 2023, which is the highest child poverty rate in the Midwest. These statistics demonstrate why many students depend on their school for more than an education, relying on school breakfast and lunch to meet their nutritional needs. Our schools are a crucial resource and House Bill 97 strengthens a school's ability to care for our youth. Ensuring that every child in Ohio receives nutritious meals during school lays the groundwork for a healthier, more equitable learning environment.

Key aspects of this bill reflect our commitment to this cause:

Universal Access to Meals: Students requesting a meal will receive one without exception. The ability to pay any outstanding meal debts will not prevent students from receiving a nutritious meal.

Provisions to Protect Student Dignity: The bill strictly prohibits practices that could harm a student's self-esteem or well-being, such as discarding served meals due to unpaid debts, requiring students to perform chores as payment, using meal refusal as a disciplinary measure, or any form of public identification or stigmatization related to meal debts.

Communication and Debt Management: All communications regarding meal debts should be directed to parents or guardians, rather than the students. This approach ensures that financial matters are handled discreetly, protecting the students' emotional well-being.

Guidance from the Department of Education: The bill requires the Department of Education to offer districts guidance on collecting meal debts, including best practices and implementing online payment systems to streamline and privatize the process.

The impacts of House Bill 97 are far-reaching: enhancing student health and academic performance, as well-nourished children demonstrate improved cognitive function and school attendance. Significantly reducing food insecurity ensures that no child faces hunger in our schools. We are strengthening our communities by cultivating a healthy, well-educated future generation. Investing in our children's health and education promises substantial long-term benefits.

Our goal here is not to absolve parents of responsibility. Instead, we must find solutions that honor a family's obligation to settle any outstanding debt while ensuring that the child's daily nutritional needs are met. Hungry children cannot learn effectively, and withholding meals only worsens the issues that led to the lunch debt in the first place.

Ultimately, the most sustainable and compassionate way to address these ongoing disputes is for Ohio to fund a universal breakfast and lunch program, either by mandating participation in the **Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)** for eligible schools or by providing universal free meal programs to cover costs for students who do not qualify under federal guidelines. This approach would eliminate the stigma and administrative challenges related to lunch debts, ensuring that all students receive the nutrition they need to thrive in school. By prioritizing our children's well-being—while maintaining a sensible approach to collecting debts—we can ensure that no student in Ohio has to learn on an empty stomach.

I ask you today to stand with us and do what's right: protect children from hunger and advocate for a universal school meal program that benefits all students in Ohio. Thank you.

In conclusion, House Bill 97 represents a critical investment in the futures of Ohio's children. It concerns their health, their success, and our shared future. Ohio's children are hungry, and the state legislature has the resources to provide for them. I urge your support for this essential legislation as we strive to nurture the minds and bodies of our next generation, creating a brighter future for all of Ohio.