

Testimony of Lisa Quigley,
Solving Hunger, Tusk Philanthropies

**Senate Education Committee
May 14, 2025**

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chairman Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee:

My name is Lisa Quigley, Director of *Solving Hunger*, a project of Tusk Philanthropies. We encourage legislatures to expand access to school meals because we know they are the most effective and efficient way to provide needed nutrition to our kids. It is an honor to have the chance to testify today.

School meals already feed over half of our nation's children, and school is where they receive most of their nutrition. For many, it's their only hot meal of the day.

In the states where kids eat for free at school, the trend lines are clear: Attendance improves, test scores rise, graduation rates increase, behavioral problems plummet, and kids are happier. They no longer face stigma, and their parents save \$1,200 per child, per year in food costs -- which also makes school meals an answer to the affordability issues that families face today.

While the federal government feeds the poorest children, the eligibility levels are so low -- and the need is so high -- that thousands of Ohio children are hungry, but not eligible for free school meals. Ohio receives almost **\$1 billion** from the federal government to feed kids, but more is needed from states to cover the neediest kids who don't qualify. All over the country, states are stepping in.

We just finished a campaign in **Arkansas**, where Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders approved funding for universal breakfast for every child.

This month, the **North Dakota** legislature expanded its program to include thousands of more kids.

South Carolina, North Carolina, and my home state of **Tennessee** are also leaders in feeding their neediest kids.

Like in other conservative states, Ohioans know that hungry kids can't learn. Feeding them in school is very popular. 67% of Ohioans support feeding **ALL** kids in school -- even when they know the \$300 million price tag. Support is even higher in Southern Ohio.

Despite this support, we understand that an investment of this size is unrealistic this year. But just because you aren't going to feed **all** kids, doesn't mean you can't work to help feed the neediest. 1/10th of that total cost would feed 92,000 more of the neediest kids.

Therefore, we are advocating that this committee consider two steps:

First, we urge you to **adopt language that Governor DeWine included in his budget proposal** that would help get schools -- with the lowest-income families -- to participate in the federal Community Eligibility program. In these schools, every child can eat for free, with no applications. Hundreds of schools have opted in -- including nearly half of Catholic schools in the state -- but hundreds have not, usually because there are start-up costs that they cannot afford.

Second, we recommend a fund to help pay for those start-up costs so that schools can participate. **In Ohio, \$33 million would serve 92,000 poor students, while bringing down \$47 million new federal dollars to help.** For every dollar spent, Ohio would get \$1.50 back.

CJ Eaton, a junior at Antwerp High School is a great example of how kids can be helped if they are in a school that can participate in the program. When CJ's mom became sick, she was hospitalized and could not work. CJ and his siblings were able to receive free meals through the standard federal application process that feeds the poorest children. Luckily, CJ's mom improved and she's able to work some again, but their household now makes just over the income limit. CJ and his siblings no longer qualify for free meals, even though their family is still struggling. If they were in schools that participate in the Community program -- where **all** kids are offered free meals -- they would still be able to eat for free in school.

There are thousands of OH kids just like CJ. We have talked to kids in Southern Ohio who have no running water or electricity in their homes. Meals in school are a lifeline to them. It's why our partners include the Ohio Children's Hospital Association, the Ohio Association of Food Banks, the Foundation for Appalachia Ohio, and companies like Kroger and CVS.

Many conservative states are feeding a much higher percentage of their neediest kids. Why do they do it? Because it's a good deal, with measurable results. Greater attendance, higher test scores, happier kids. For \$33 million, Ohio could be next.

Thank you for your attention and consideration.