

Testimony Before the House Finance Committee Drew Plantz, Student
Chesapeake High
School March 29,
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Chairman Edwards, Vice Chair LaRe, and Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to speak before your committee.

My name is Drew Plantz and I am a sophomore at Chesapeake High School. I am speaking to you today as an interested party as it relates to the State Operating Budget. I am urging you to consider including investments in school meals for all of Ohio's students. I was born and raised in Chesapeake, Ohio and I will always be proud to call the hills of Southern Ohio my home. In addition to school, I have always been active within my community, such as attending my local church, playing in various sports and volunteering for several local causes. I have been blessed to have a supportive family that can provide for my needs. However, several of my friends, and most of my fellow students are not as fortunate as I am.

If schools were able to provide school meals to all of the students, like they did last school year, it is my hope that somehow my friends, that I know often go hungry, can be helped.

Our school district has approximately 50% of our students on free or reduced lunch and it is my understanding that is a low estimate. Many families are proud and do not want to apply for assistance so they do not turn in the paperwork. And many families do complete the paperwork and find out they a couple of hundred dollars passed the threshold for being eligible for any assistance. Even if parents do fill out the paperwork, many of the students don't want to turn the paperwork in because they don't want to be seen as poor. Kids would rather not eat than be seen as someone who is less than their friends.

Our community also has a high rate of substance abuse. You may have heard of the Netflix Documentary Heroin(e) which was filmed in Huntington, WV. My small town has three bridges that connect us to Huntington, WV and we have a transient population that seems to go back and forth between Chesapeake and Huntington. I say that to say this, we have an abundance of students whose parents have abandoned them, lost custody of them, been incarcerated, or died due to drugs and drug addiction. I have many friends that have to be raised by relatives and friends. Just this week, a good friend and teammate of mine was suddenly uprooted from his home and the support of his school, team, and community because his father was incarcerated.

He was forced to move in with his estranged mother, who also struggles with drug addiction. Like my friend, most of these students come from low-income families and struggle with food insecurity. Would a free meal program have saved my friend's dad from being incarcerated?

Probably not. But that lifestyle is becoming generational. A free meal program might allow some of my friends to go through the lunch line as an equal, get a good meal, be able to focus in class, get good grades, and maybe let them see that there is a brighter future for them than what they are currently experiencing.

Every Christmas my family volunteers at our local food bank called the CMO. This foodbank is run by community members who have a heart for people, and it relies on food from local grocery stores and commodities out of the Southeastern Ohio food bank in Logan, Ohio. They also get some United Way Funding and are supported by churches, community members, and local donations from a secondhand shop. The foodbank is not fancy. As a matter of fact, it is located inside what we call our Community Center. It's an old school building with an ancient heating system and no air conditioning during the summer months. When we pass out food at Christmas time, we have to make sure we dress warmly due to extremely cold temperatures inside the building. Several things stand out to me every year when we pass out food. The first is when a classmate and their family pulls in to get free food. The second is the line of cars that starts at six am and stretched about a half a mile all day long.

In addition to our local food bank, our local elementary school and middle school also give out food on Fridays in student backpacks. Donations come from local resources, teachers, and community donations.

Our school is not only part of the community, it is the focal point of our community. I feel like everyone works hard to help one another, but at some point, it becomes overwhelming. Investments in school meals for all students would help schools be able to provide not only academically, but also physically for our students. Have you ever tried to focus when you're hungry? At some point, I'm sure most of us have and we would all agree, it's not easy! Now imagine having that feeling all the time. I don't know how many of my classmates go all day without eating, but I'm sure it affects their learning.

Thank you for allowing me to speak with you today.