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February 6, 2015

To : Members of the Education Committee

From: Julia Tse, Child Welfare Policy Associate

RE: LB 524 – Change provisions documenting eligibility relating to free and reduced-price school meals

Factors that contribute to educational success for children are not just limited to the classroom. Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 524 because it provides a framework to help increase access to nutritious meals for children across the state. By encouraging utilization of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), we can ensure that all available resources are maximized in reducing child hunger, particularly in high-poverty schools.

About 44% of all Nebraska children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, a 7% increase since 2008; approximately 1 in 5 children in the state don't know where their next meal is coming from.¹ Research shows that food insecurity has immense consequences on overall child well-being. **In addition to negatively affecting academic performance and intellectual achievement, hunger has been linked to impaired development, poor health, psychosocial problems, and behavioral issues.**² Providing universal school meals for lower income student populations can also benefit families who may face language or literacy barriers in the application process, in addition to easing financial burdens for food-insecure households.

Targeting improved access to school meals through the CEP also improves the overall viability of school nutrition programs. Decreasing administrative burdens in meal service, data and payment collection, and processing applications can allow school nutrition programs to refocus time and resources on keeping students happy and healthy for a full day of learning. Moreover, states that have implemented the CEP have reported higher participation in breakfast (by 25%) and lunch (by 13%),³ resulting in increased revenue and quality in school nutrition programs.⁴ The successes observed in breakfast participation would be a welcome change in Nebraska, which was recently ranked as one of the three most underutilized breakfast programs in the country.⁵

Overall, we believe that CEP presents an opportunity to make our high poverty schools free of child hunger. We appreciate that Nebraska is taking a

¹ Kids Count in Nebraska 2014 Report.

² Murphy, C. et al, "Reading, Writing, and Hungry: The Consequences of Food Insecurity on Children, and on Our Nation's Economic Success," Partnership for America's Economic Success, 2008.

³ "Community Eligibility," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2013.

⁴ "Community Eligibility: An Amazing New Opportunity," Food Research and Action Center.

⁵ "Profile of Hunger, Poverty, and Federal Nutrition Programs: Nebraska," Food Research and Action Center.

thoughtful approach to implement this new option, but we believe that the state legislature and the Nebraska Department of Education should do all that they can to support schools that want to adopt this option. This includes providing clear guidance and ensuring that data collection issues don't serve as a barrier. In December of 2014 when data were released on the uptake of this new option nationwide, **Nebraska was second-to-last in CEP elections by state, with only 329 Nebraska students enrolled at CEP schools** (out of 6.4 million nationwide).⁶ We need to ensure that school kids in Nebraska don't face additional barriers to hunger when compared to their peers in other states.

LB 524 represents an important opportunity for our state to ensure that hunger is not a learning barrier for children in Nebraska. Many states have already seen tremendous success in leveraging this option to help all children reach their full potential while also simplifying school meal programs. We want to thank Senator Sullivan and the members of this committee for their leadership on this issue and respectfully urge you to advance this bill forward. Thank you.

⁶ "Community Eligibility Provision Elections by State as of September 1, 2014," USDA Food and Nutrition Service.