



7521 Main Street, Suite 103
Omaha, Nebraska 68127

(402) 597-3100
www.voicesforchildren.com

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Eric Johnson
President

Katie Weitz, PhD
Vice President

Lorraine Chang, JD
Secretary

Bruce Meyers
Treasurer

Amy Boesen
Gary Bren
Wes Cole, MBA
Al Davis

Jeremy Fitzpatrick, JD
Aaron Ford, MBA, MSW
Noah Greenwald, JD
Gatsby Gottsch Solheim, JD
Susan Mayberger, MA
John Stalnaker, JD

Aubrey Mancuso, MSW
Executive Director

January 28, 2019

To: Chairman Groene and Members of the Education Committee

From: Julia Tse, Policy Coordinator for Economic Stability and Health

RE: Support for LB 251 to Adopt the Child Hunger and Workforce Readiness Act

Children are Nebraska's greatest resource, and all Nebraskans have a stake in ensuring that all children are able to reach their full potential in adulthood. Success in the classroom for any individual child hinges on a multitude of factors, none of which is more essential than proper nutrition. Research shows that hungry children are less equipped to learn in the classroom, significantly reducing their chances of becoming productive members of the workforce.ⁱ Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 251 because it would ease hunger among many of our state's most vulnerable students.

Household hunger is at an all-time high in Nebraska, affecting nearly 1 in 5 children in the state.ⁱⁱ Left unaddressed, hunger among children during critical developmental years will threaten future economic prosperity for generations to come. Since 1946, school meals have provided an effective solution to hunger as a barrier to learning. Federal child nutrition programs provide funds for all breakfasts and lunches served in participating public and nonpublic schools, with higher reimbursement rates provided for students from low-income households. Children in households with income less than 130% of the federal poverty level (FPL) are eligible for free school meals, which children in households with income between 130% and 185% of FPL are eligible for reduced-price meals, which is no more than \$0.40 for lunch and \$0.30 for breakfast.ⁱⁱⁱ

Building upon the successes of the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, LB 251 would:

Ensure that 29,000 Nebraska students are always ready to learn regardless of their family circumstances. Though the current co-pay required of reduced-price eligible students is seemingly insignificant, data show that families within this income range are struggling to make ends meet now, more than ever. Wages have stagnated for workers in the last few decades, far outpaced by the median cost of raising a family as child care and health care costs skyrocket.^{iv} During the school year, the daily costs of school meals can easily add up for families. These students are particularly vulnerable to the practice of "lunch shaming," in which a student is refused meal service or provided an alternate meal when they are unable to pay.

Allow more students and schools to focus on learning, particularly in high poverty schools. Research has linked school breakfast to better student performance and behavior, including improved attendance, lower levels of hyperactivity, fewer disciplinary referrals, and even fewer visits to the school nurse.^v LB 251 would concentrate the benefits of increased meal participation in higher needs schools by targeting low-income students.

Increase meal participation and enhance financial viability for schools. Similar policies adopted in other states result in increased meal participation. Schools in Nebraska have historically struggled with some of the lowest breakfast participation rates in the country. The anticipated increase in breakfast participation as the result of LB 251 would allow more schools to achieve economies of scale in breakfast programs, which is essential for smaller and rural schools.^{vi}

School meal programs provide a critical safeguard against hunger for many Nebraska children, and LB 251 would strengthen existing protections against child hunger and its adverse outcomes. Ensuring that no needy student will have to worry about missing lunch is an investment that produces immeasurable long-term benefits in the form of improved academic performance, behavior, and overall student wellness.

We thank Senator Walz for her leadership on this issue and respectfully urge the committee to advance LB 251. Thank you.

ⁱ Council on Community Pediatrics and Committee on Nutrition, "Promoting Food Insecurity for All Children," *Pediatrics* 136, no. 5 (2015), doi: 10.1542/peds.2015-3301.

ⁱⁱ Voices for Children in Nebraska, *2016 Kids Count in Nebraska Report*, available online at: <http://kidscountnebraska.com>.

ⁱⁱⁱ In 2019, 130% of FPL was \$27,729 for a family of 3 and 185% of FPL was \$39,460 for a family of 3.

^{iv} "Household expenditures and Income: Balancing Family Finances in Today's Economy," Pew Charitable Trusts, March 2016, available at: http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2016/03/household_expenditures_and_income.pdf.

^v Food Research and Action Center, "Research Brief: Breakfast for Learning," October 2016, <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfastforlearning-1.pdf>.

^{vi} Voices for Children in Nebraska, "Food for Thought: School Nutrition for Student Performance," November 2016, <http://voicesforchildren.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Nutrition-IssueBrief.pdf>.