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February 19, 2019

To: Chair Groene and Members of the Education Committee
From: Julia Tse, Policy Coordinator for Economic Stability and Health
RE: Support for LB 728 – Provide duties relating to school meals

Hunger is a health issue, and hunger during childhood can negatively impact brain development. Left unaddressed, hunger can permanently affect a child's health and functioning and result in poor outcomes in adulthood. Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 728 because it takes steps toward ensuring that schools respond appropriately when a student has insufficient funds to pay for school meals.

School meals are an important part of reducing child hunger. Over 82,000 Nebraska children, 17.3% of our children, do not have consistent access to healthy food.ⁱ As wages stagnate, and the cost of living rises, more and more children rely on school meals as a stable source of nutrition. Today, 44.7% of Nebraska students are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, compared to 36.4% ten years ago.ⁱⁱ

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has studied policies and practices that address unpaid meal debts in schools across the nation. In 2016, after collecting feedback from stakeholders, the USDA directed all school food authorities (SFAs) that administer federal school lunch and breakfast programs to institute a policy on the issue and to clearly communicate the policy.ⁱⁱⁱ

The new USDA guidance falls short of providing standards or directives for schools in how to handle unpaid meal debt but ensures that communications help parents or guardians understand the school's policy and the potential implications for their children. In the aftermath of multiple media reports about children being shamed at the lunch line or even refused a meal for insufficient funds, several states have acted to prohibit "lunch shaming."

In 2017, New Mexico passed the Hunger-Free Students' Bill of Rights Act, which prohibited public shaming or punishing of students with meal debts and the disposal of meals already served.^{iv} At least 9 other states have passed similar legislation, including Illinois and Iowa last year.^v

Last year, Senator Walz introduced LR 393 to better understand how widely this issue is affecting Nebraska's students. The study found a lack of uniformity across districts, and significant amounts of debt from the districts responding. LB 728 creates a model baseline of standards for Nebraska districts in handling unpaid meal debts, while still allowing districts to craft their own policy.

School should be a place where students feel safe and can focus on learning, not a place where they can be publicly shamed for circumstances beyond their control. We thank Senator Walz for her continued leadership on this issue and this committee for their time and consideration. We respectfully urge you to advance LB 728 to General File. Thank you.

ⁱ Voices for Children in Nebraska, *Kids Count in Nebraska 2018 Report*, 112, <https://kidscountnebraska.com/>.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 50.

ⁱⁱⁱ Angela Kline, "Unpaid Meal Charges: Local Meal Charge Policies," USDA Memorandum SP 46-2016, July 2016, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/cn/SP46-2016os.pdf>.

^{iv} New Mexico Senate Bill 374, 2017, <https://www.nmlegis.gov/Sessions/17%20Regular/final/SB0374.pdf>.

^v Illinois Senate Bill 2429, 2018, <https://legiscan.com/IL/text/SB2428/2017>. Iowa House File 2467, 2018, <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=87&ba=HF2467>.