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Thank you Chairwoman Walz and members of the Education Committee. My name is Julie Erickson and today I am representing Voices for Children in Nebraska in support of LB 117. Children are Nebraska’s greatest resource, and when all children can reach their full potential, our state and economy are better off. Children dealing with hunger are distracted from learning, more likely to be absent or tardy, and are more likely to have behavioral issues in the classroom.[[1]](#endnote-1) Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 117 because it would ensure that hunger isn’t a barrier to learning.

Today, almost 17 percent of Nebraska’s children do not have reliable and adequate access to nutritious food.[[2]](#endnote-2) Since 1946, school meals have provided an effective solution to hunger as a barrier to learning. Federal child nutrition programs provide funds for each breakfast and lunch served in participating schools, with higher reimbursement rates provided for meals served to students from low-income households and schools with higher levels of poverty receive a higher reimbursement per meal. These federal reimbursements will help offset the cost of providing free meals to every student.

Building on the successes of the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, LB 117 would ensure that every public school student is ready to learn every school day. Although Nebraska parents are working hard, more and more families are struggling to make ends meet and the daily cost of school meals can add up. No student should have to worry about being singled out for not having enough funds in their meal account during mealtimes or feel ashamed to receive a free or reduced-price meal. LB 117 eliminates lunchroom stigma, ensures that no child is turned away from a meal in school, and reduces administrative burdens for school nutrition staff.

Schools in Nebraska have historically struggled with some of the lowest breakfast participation rates in the country. During the 2018-2019 school year, Nebraska was ranked 48th for lowest breakfast participation among low-income students.[[3]](#endnote-3) The anticipated increase in breakfast participation as the result of LB 117 would allow more schools to achieve economies of scale in breakfast programs, which is essential for smaller and rural schools.[[4]](#endnote-4)

More and more states are moving away policies that would deny children a meal during the school day because of paperwork. At least 12 states have eliminated the reduced-price co-pay for students,[[5]](#endnote-5) while Florida, Texas, and the District of Columbia provide funding to schools to offer free universal breakfast to students.[[6]](#endnote-6) Fueled by the federal Community Eligibility Provision, several large cities offer all school meals at no cost to every student, and in the last few years, states have caught on. West Virginia created a public-private fund to offer free breakfast and lunch to all students, building on a pilot that started in 2011.[[7]](#endnote-7) Last year, Oregon raised eligibility for free school meals from 130% of the federal poverty level (FPL) to 300% of FPL, in alignment with eligibility for the state’s public children’s health insurance program.[[8]](#endnote-8) Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, free school meals have been provided to all students nationally and this has been an essential lifeline for many families.

We thank Senator Cavanaugh for her leadership on this issue and respectfully urge the committee to advance LB 117. Thank you.

1. 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. Food Research and Action Center, “Research Brief: Breakfast for Learning,” October 2016, <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfastforlearning-1.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Voices for Children in Nebraska, *Kids Count in Nebraska 2020 Report*, 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “School Breakfast Scorecard: School Year 2018-2019,” Food Research & Action Center, February 2020, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Breakfast-Scorecard-2018-2019_FNL.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. 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>. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Colorado, the District of Columbia, Minnesota, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington have eliminated the reduced-price co-pay for breakfasts or breakfasts and lunch. *Ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In Florida and Texas, funding is limited to certain high-poverty schools, while all schools are required to offer free breakfast to all students in the District of Columbia. “School Meals Legislation and Funding by State,” Food Research & Action Center, February 2020, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-Legislation-and-Funding-by-State-February-2020.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Anduamlak Meharie et al., “Universal Free Meals Pilot Project: Evaluation Report,” West Virginia Department of Education, Division of Teaching and Learning, Office of Research, February 2013, <https://wvde.us/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/UniversalFreeMealsPilotEvaluation2013.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. “School Meals Legislation and Funding by State,” Food Research & Action Center. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)