



319 S 17<sup>th</sup> St. Suite 212  
Omaha, NE 68102

(402) 597-3100  
www.voicesforchildren.com

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January 23, 2024

To: Chairperson Murman and Members of the Education Committee

From: Katie Nungesser, Policy Coordinator for Voices for Children in Nebraska

**RE: Support of LB 855, Prohibit school districts from taking certain actions relating to outstanding debts on a school lunch or breakfast account**

Thank you, Chairperson Murman and members of the Education Committee. My name is Katie Nungesser, and I am representing Voices for Children in Nebraska in support of LB 855. Children are Nebraska's greatest asset, and when all children can reach their full potential, our state and communities are better off. We believe all children in Nebraska deserve access to nutritious and healthy meals at school.

School meals play a vital role in the development and well-being of every student. As the cost of these meals rise, it has become increasingly challenging for Nebraska families to afford them. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) does not allow school lunch funds to be used to cover meal debt. Families with incomes slightly over certain limits often find themselves struggling to keep up with school meal accounts as they try to make ends meet. The existing free and reduced meals programs, designed to assist families in need, fall short in addressing the financial challenges faced by those just above the limit.

Furthermore, the issue extends to families that are eligible for free or reduced meals, as they may unknowingly end up in collections due to administrative errors. According to the USDA, errors in administrative procedures and program limitations are leading to some students not receiving free or reduced meals each year. Simple mistakes, such as misspelling a child's name, can result in families accumulating significant debts, despite their belief that their student is qualified and participating in the program.

Although schools are not able to use federal lunch program money to help families in school meal debt, the federal program does allow schools to use program money to contract with for-profit collection agencies.

Prior to this role, I was a food banker for ten years. I know from walking the lines and engaging with those needing food assistance in our community, many of these families are not ignoring their meal debts. They are struggling to put food on the table at home and having to make tradeoffs in their finances to keep their basic needs met. Turning their meal debt into a collections agency seems like a step in the wrong direction to help these Nebraskans care for their families.

LB 855 is a crucial step in addressing these challenges by ensuring that school meal debt does not lead to punitive measures like collections. I urge you to consider the impact of this legislation on the well-being of Nebraska's children and families. By supporting LB 855, we can collectively contribute to a system that prioritizes access to nutritious meals for all students, regardless of their economic circumstances.

Sincerely,

Katie Nungesser