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7521 Main Street, Suite 103
Omaha, Nebraska 68127

(402) 597-3100
www.voicesforchildren.com

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To: Chairperson Murman and Members of the Education Committee
From: Anahí Salazar, Policy Coordinator for Voices for Children in Nebraska
RE: Support of LB 99, adopt the Hunger-Free Schools Act

Thank you, Chairperson Murman and members of the Education Committee. My name is Anahí Salazar and today I am representing Voices for Children in Nebraska in support of LB 99. Children are Nebraska's greatest asset, and when all children can reach their full potential, our state and economy are better off. Breakfast and lunch are essential to every child's development and well-being. Access to nutritious and healthy meals is what every child in Nebraska deserves.

Eating breakfast at school is associated with better attendance rates, fewer missed days, and better test scores.¹ LB 99 would ensure that every student is going into their classroom in the morning fueled for the day. Achieving student success in the classroom is directly correlated with students having their basic needs met, one of which is healthy and nutritious meals. No cost meals help students' well-being by decrease the stressor of having to figure out if they have enough money in their school account for their next school meal.

In 2021, there were almost 84,000 Nebraska households who were food insecure, meaning that someone in the household reduced their meal intake because there was not enough food to eat in the home.² And 1 in 9 Nebraska households do not know where their next meal is coming from, an increase in uncertainty from 2020.

Since 1946, school meals have provided an effective solution to hunger as a barrier to learning. With the ongoing success of the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs, LB 99 would ensure that every public school student is ready to learn every day. A student who is hungry cannot learn. Students with food insecurity can have lower math and reading gains, increased risk of poor physical and mental health outcomes, and lower academic readiness.³

With no cost meals students would be able to concentrate on their academics and school, families do not have to worry about the extra financial burden, and educators can feel reassured in knowing their students are receiving meals throughout the day. LB 99 eliminates inequity by expanding access to food for every student. School meals should be a social time for every student, and LB 99 would allow students to joyfully interact with their peers, preventing added stressors for themselves and their families. When schools are able to offer no cost meals, school stigma in the lunchroom becomes a nonfactor.

Voices for Children in Nebraska supports LB 99 because it would ensure children across the state of Nebraska access to school nutritious meals. Thank you, Senator Cavanaugh, for bringing this important issue forward and we respectfully urge the committee to advance LB 99. Thank you.

¹ CDC. "Making Time for School Lunch." CDC, 2019, www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/nutrition/school_lunch.htm.

² Coleman-Jensen, Alisha, et al. "Household Food Security in the United States in 2013." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, vol. 309, 2014, www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/45265/48787_err173.pdf?v=0, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2504067>.

³ "The Case for Universal Free Meals for All: A Permanent Solution." *Forefront Group*, 5 May 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1377/forefront.20220504.114330>.

Personal experience:

When you're testifying in person, I would make sure you have the time to get to this part - so if you hand them the written testimony, you can say something like " I've given you my written testimony with statistics and research pertaining to the benefits of free school meals, and I'd be happy to answer any questions about it, but I'd like to use this time to talk about my prior experience as a teacher..."

Before CEP went into effect in our school, I had many instances of students not wanting to eat lunch because their families had not added money to their lunch accounts or hadn't turned in the forms for free and reduced lunch. Not only are there barriers for families when it comes to submitting the paperwork needed to access free or reduced school meals, there are also familial circumstances that can change in an instant. A caregiver lost their job, their transportation, or one of their multiple sources of income, a family member becomes ill and finances have to shift in the household. Why should a child have to forgo access to school meals because of something they can't control. There were multiple times when I had students start to accrue debt, I knew this because I had to hand them a paper that told them so. I called Nutrition Services to try and pay the debt myself and was told I was not allowed. As an educator, I didn't want to see my student go hungry, so I purchased snack goods but that doesn't help when the problem is not only feeding the stomach with a snack but also the social aspect of school meals. When the Community Eligibility Provision went into effect where I was working, you could feel the shift in school cafeteria culture. No one was worried when going through the lunch line, kids were able to be kids, excited that the strawberry milk was in stock, they grabbed their tray and sat down to eat a meal with their peers. I never had to hand out another slip of paper to a student or family that told them they owed money. Every student knew they could eat both breakfast and lunch, no child had to fret. LB 99 would give every student in Nebraska this opportunity, not only schools which are in designated zones covered by CEP. Feeding students will have its return tenfold, with more student participation in academic and social areas, as well as better mental health outcomes and every student in Nebraska deserves that!