

Testimony of Lori Adkins, MS, SNS, CHE
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Before the Michigan House of Representatives, School Aid and Education Subcommittee
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Thank you to the Committee for this opportunity to discuss the innumerable benefits of ensuring every student has equal access to free, nutritious school meals. Research shows students eat their healthiest meals at school, and these meals are proven to boost test scores, improve attendance and classroom behavior and contribute to students' overall health and wellness.

Last year when school nutrition staff could offer free meals to *all* students, we witnessed so many positive changes. Hungry children didn't have to worry about whether they could get a meal. More students ate healthy school meals, which lifted the shame and stigma for low-income students who depend on free meals. Teachers knew their students were fueled for learning, and families had one less thing to worry about.

With the loss of free meals for all students, school nutrition staff have shared heartbreaking stories of Michigan families who are just a few dollars over the income limit for meal benefits, but still struggle to make ends meet. The meal application form only collects income data without accounting for expenses. Many working families, burdened by high health care costs, a rent increase or debt payments, receive no support. Meanwhile, in Oakland County, where our students speak over 70 different languages, many immigrant families are fearful to even apply for free meals. Too often their children go without.

A recent School Nutrition Association survey revealed the high cost of the loss of free meals. Sixty-seven percent of school meal programs that now charge for meals reported an increase in stigma for low-income students. Ninety-six percent struggle with unpaid meal debt and 65 percent report this debt has become a *significant* challenge for their program. When families are unable to pay for student meals, schools must cut into education funds to cover the debt.

Hunger impacts *every* child. Rich or poor, there's no point trying to teach a student who is distracted by a growling stomach. We support our students with a free bus ride to school, textbooks and laptops to help them learn. Healthy school meals are just as important to ensuring our students' success. I strongly urge the committee to support offering free school meals to all of Michigan's children.

Thank you.