

Testimony in Support of Raised House Bill No. 5510

AN ACT CONCERNING FUNDING FOR STUDENT MEALS

March 26, 2024

Dear Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Berthel, Representative Nuccio, and esteemed Connecticut General Assembly members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is **[YOUR NAME]** and I live in **[YOUR TOWN]**.

I commend Governor Lamont's efforts that will fund the State Department of Education through the 2024-25 school year to allow students who are eligible for reduced-priced meals to get them at no cost. This is a significant step in the right direction.

But this step is still not enough. Please do the right thing and pass universal school breakfast and lunch so no child in Connecticut goes hungry at school.

[Insert your own story about this issue]

Hungry kids don't learn. Research shows us when meals are offered at no cost at school to everyone, there is less absenteeism, less bullying, and kids are more prepared to learn. Even students who eat something at home and get a school breakfast perform better on tests.

One in eight Connecticut children suffer from hunger and while Governor Lamont's efforts will allow some of these children to receive free meals at school, there are many whose families are not eligible for reduced-price meals and also cannot afford the cost of meals for the whole school year.

On February 12th the Hartford Courant reported that **student debt from unpaid meals is soaring** after the vast majority of Connecticut schools returned to a paid lunch model at the start of the 2023 to 2024 school year. The School Nutrition Association of Connecticut says, as an example, that two Groton elementary schools and one high school have together amassed \$40,000 in school meal debt—and expect that debt to reach \$80,000 by the end of the year.

In many cases students with lunch debt come from families that make too much to qualify for free lunch, but too little to make ends meet.

In Connecticut, a family can earn no more than \$55,500 annual gross income to receive meals at no cost. However, according to the Connecticut United Way, that same family's ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) Household Survival Budget was \$106,632 in 2021, leaving a large gap in the ability to pay for necessities.

According to the United Way 28% of households in Connecticut live above the federal poverty line but below the ALICE threshold. In Shelton the Board of Education is hiring a

collections agent to try and get funds from families who owe \$100 or more—and is suspending all students who owe more than \$100 from paid extracurricular activities and field trips until their balance is paid. **This is unconscionable—and completely avoidable.**

No hungry child should feel they need to shy away from a healthy breakfast and lunch at school because their parents or guardians are afraid of racking up debt owed to the school district.

I thank Governor Lamont and you as leaders and members of the Appropriations Committee for your efforts that will fund the State Department of Education through the 2024-25 school year to allow students who are eligible for reduced-priced meals to get them at no cost.

I also urge you to fund no-cost breakfast and lunch for all kids in Connecticut schools. Thank you.

Sincerely,

[YOUR NAME AND TOWN]