



**Testimony Presented to the Senate Education Committee
SB 500 – Permanent healthy school meals for all**

Julie Cassidy, Senior Policy Analyst
September 19, 2023

Good afternoon, Chair Polehanki and members of the Senate Committee on Education. I'm Julie Cassidy, Senior Policy Analyst with the Michigan League for Public Policy. The League is a nonpartisan research and advocacy organization that uses data to educate, advocate and fight for policy solutions to lift up Michiganders who have been systemically left out of prosperity. The League is also the state's Kids Count organization, working as part of a national effort to measure the well-being of children at the state and local levels and to shape efforts that improve their lives.

Thank you for the opportunity to express our support for Senate Bill 500, making no-cost healthy school meals for all a permanent statewide option. We applaud the legislature and Gov. Whitmer for including support for hunger-free schools in the budget for the current school year, and wish to see this critical investment in children's health continued in the years to come.

Guaranteed access to school meals will help ensure that all Michigan kids, including the 1 in 8 who experience hunger, have the opportunity to reach their full potential. Food security is associated with better health, higher school attendance and greater academic achievement. Nutrition is especially important during childhood, a critical period for brain development.

Expanding access to school meals is proven to enhance food security and diet quality, having a positive impact on kids' physical and mental health. Additionally, school meals are linked to improved student attendance, attentiveness and behavior. All of this translates into success in school, including better math and reading test scores, grades, and graduation rates.

While the one year of funding already provided is an important step, it isn't sufficient to fix Michigan's decades-long record of failing our students. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2023 Kids Count Data Book ranks Michigan an embarrassing 42nd in the nation for education, with roughly 3 in 4 students not proficient in reading or math. A recent report by Altarum and the Citizens Research Council identified low educational attainment among Michiganders as a threat to the state's economic prosperity. Turning these dismal numbers around requires ongoing investment in children.

Giving all students equitable access to food can reduce bullying and foster a greater sense of community within schools. It can also alleviate toxic stress for children with anxiety over where their next meal will come from. This is especially important as we strive to address a youth mental health crisis that worsened during the pandemic.

Using data to educate, advocate and fight for policy solutions that undo historic and systemic racial and economic inequities to lift up Michiganders who have been left out of prosperity.

1223 TURNER STREET • SUITE G1 • LANSING, MICHIGAN 48906

P: 517.487.5436 • F: 517.371.4546 • WWW.MLPP.ORG

A UNITED WAY AGENCY

This investment could have the greatest impact in northern Michigan as well as urban areas in the lower part of the state. Despite their geographic and demographic differences, many of these communities have in common high rates of child poverty and food insecurity.

Busy parents at all income levels will also save time and money—an estimated \$850 per student annually. That’s an entire year’s worth of diapers, five months of electricity bills or 228 gallons of gasoline.

While we appreciate the state support for universal meals during this school year, nourishment of Michigan’s future parents, workers and leaders requires our sustained commitment. Please act on this opportunity for our kids to reap the benefits of healthy school meals for all in the current school year and beyond.