



January 23, 2023

Minnesota House of Representatives  
Education Finance Committee  
443 State Office Building  
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Youakim and Committee Members:

On behalf of the team at Second Harvest Heartland, our region's largest food bank, I am writing to urge you to support HF5 provide free, nutritious school meals to all Minnesota students. We cannot solve hunger through food distributions alone, so we must fully leverage federal nutrition programs, like the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program, to best support Minnesota kids in need.

For too many Minnesota students, the best, most nutritious, and often the only food they eat each day comes from their school cafeteria. School meals are a critical source of nutrition for many children, helping them learn and be active in the short term, and thrive academically, physically, and emotionally in the long term. Consistent access to school meals can also help establish eating habits that create healthier futures and reduce the likelihood of chronic conditions like diabetes and heart disease, as well as eliminate the costs associated with these managing these diseases.

Yet too many students facing food insecurity do not realize the many benefits of receiving meals at school. More than a quarter of the nearly 200,000 Minnesota kids experiencing food insecurity live in households with incomes too high to qualify for free school meals. Pre-pandemic meal participation data from the Minnesota Department of Education also shows us that even among families who are eligible for free meals, over twenty percent, or more than 70,000 kids, do not participate due to stigma, administrative barriers, and other challenges.

HF5 would allow all districts to offer breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge, reducing child hunger and making the provision of school meals more efficient. Not only will this legislation boost school meal participation and end lunch shaming, but it will also reduce administrative burden, eliminate unpaid lunch debt, and maximize federal resources.

We urge your support for HF5 so we can continue to ensure all children receive the nourishment they need to be successful in school. Thank you for your consideration and commitment to Minnesota's children.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Allison O'Toole".

Allison O'Toole  
Chief Executive Officer  
Second Harvest Heartland