



**Testimony of the
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Public Hearing Regarding
Universal School Meals**

**Presented to the
House Democratic Policy Committee
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**By
Jeff Ney
PSEA Vice-President**

Good evening, Chairman Bizzarro and members of the House Democratic Policy Committee – thank you for inviting me to testify. I would also like to extend special thanks to Representative Davidson for requesting this hearing and for elevating this critically important issue. My name is Jeff Ney, and I serve as vice president of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). On behalf of our 177,000 members, thank you for the opportunity to share our perspective on how food insecurity affects student learning and overall well-being.

I come before you tonight both as an educator with more than two decades in the classroom and as a representative of PSEA’s diverse membership. While our members come from different communities and backgrounds, we are united by our shared values. We chose careers in education because we believe *every student* deserves the opportunity to succeed—and that requires more than strong instruction alone. It requires meeting students’ basic needs, including consistent access to nutritious food.

This brings me to a reality every educator knows all too well: a hungry child cannot learn to their full potential. This is not an abstract concept or a talking point—it is the lived experience of students and the educators who support them across Pennsylvania.

What Educators Witness Every Day

Research clearly shows that students experiencing food insecurity have higher rates of absenteeism, lower academic performance, and greater difficulty regulating emotions and behavior. But educators do not need studies to understand these impacts—we see the impact every day in our classrooms and schools.

We see it in the student who cannot concentrate because her stomach aches from hunger; in the child who becomes irritable or withdrawn because he has not eaten since the day before; and in the older student who struggles to stay awake because he gave the last of the food at home to his younger siblings. Sadly, these are not rare or isolated moments, they are recurring realities.

As educators, we are constantly reading nonverbal cues to understand what students need to fully engage in learning. Any teacher can tell the moment a child walks through the door when something is not right. When a student comes to school hungry, that hunger—and how to relieve it—dominates their attention before instruction even begins.

When students lack consistent access to food, their ability to self-regulate and engage in learning is compromised from the outset. Hunger undermines concentration, memory, and emotional stability. It can cause students to become agitated, withdrawn, or disruptive—behaviors that are too often treated as disciplinary issues rather than signs of unmet basic needs. For students who already require additional behavioral or emotional support, hunger compounds these challenges and can intensify negative outcomes at school.

Children need reliable, nutritious food to focus, manage emotions, and learn. Without it, even the strongest instruction cannot fully reach them. During my 20 years teaching and coaching in the Wilkes-Barre Area School District, I saw firsthand how profoundly hunger affects a child's ability to learn.

I also saw how transformative it is when students are fed, focused, and ready to learn.

Why School Meals Matter

Food insecurity remains a significant barrier to student success in Pennsylvania. Universal school meals are among the most direct, effective, and immediate interventions we can make to improve student outcomes. For many students, school is the most reliable source of food they have—and often the healthiest and most complete meal they will eat that day.

School meals provide nutritional consistency to students that many families, especially those living just above federal income thresholds, struggle to maintain amid rising food costs and wages that have not kept pace.

School meals are not a peripheral service—they are foundational for student success.

Federal Changes Undermine Student Learning

Federal food assistance programs play a critical role in enabling schools to provide free meals to students. Universal school meals promote stability, eliminate stigma, reduce administrative burdens, and allow school staff to focus on students rather than paperwork and meal debt collection. They also ease financial stress for families—particularly those who earn just above eligibility cutoffs.

Unfortunately, instead of strengthening these programs, President Trump and Congressional Republicans enacted the **largest cut ever** to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to help fund making tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans permanent as part of the OBBBA/reconciliation bill adopted in July.

For the first time ever, states will be required to pay a share of SNAP benefits. In addition, OBBBA increases states' share of administrative costs from 50 to 75 percent. This dramatic cost shift will strain already tight state budgets, weaken the capacity to serve families, and reduce access to food for millions of people.

The harmful policies enacted in OBBBA create a dangerous domino effect across Pennsylvania. Shifting eligibility and coverage for SNAP will cause many families to lose benefits. As families lose SNAP or Medicaid, fewer children will be automatically eligible for free school meals. That, in turn, makes fewer schools eligible for the Community Eligibility Provision, which allows high-need schools to provide free meals for all students. Schools face increased administrative strain and paperwork to serve students, at a time when staffing

shortages are already severe. When eligibility becomes more complicated, students are more likely to slip through the cracks and go hungry.

What Pennsylvania Can Do

While the Commonwealth cannot control these federal policy shifts, we can and must mitigate their impact. State-level action can protect students, families, and schools from disruption and ensure stability regardless of changes in Washington.

PSEA applauds Governor Shapiro for expanding universal breakfast and advocating for universal lunch and other food security initiatives. Under Governor Shapiro’s leadership, Pennsylvania’s universal free breakfast program has already led to increased student participation statewide, particularly among students who previously did not qualify under federal income thresholds. Schools also report smoother starts to the school day, fewer nurse visits due to hunger, and improved student readiness to learn. However, lunch remains governed by outdated federal income thresholds that fail to reflect today’s economic realities. As a result, thousands of students still come to school each day without reliable access to a nutritious midday meal.

PSEA commends Representatives Kinkead, Davidson, and Kahn for sponsoring House Bill 180, legislation that seeks to address these gaps. HB 180 would establish a state fund to provide school lunches for all students, including those not covered under existing federal programs. This legislation, together with Governor Shapiro’s leadership advocating for expanded funding and access to food assistance programs, reflects Pennsylvania’s commitment to building a comprehensive school nutrition system that supports every student in every community.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue and for your continued commitment to students and public education. I am happy to answer any questions.