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Haley Kottler, Campaign Director
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Testimony in Support of Budget Recommendation for Reduced Price Meals Co-Pay
House Committee on K-12 Education Budget

Chairman Goetz, Ranking Member Winn, and Members of the House Committee on K-12 Education Budget,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. I am here in support of the budget recommendation for eliminating the copay for families receiving reduced-price school meals, which would assist in providing food to some of the most vulnerable children across the state while providing economic relief to their families.

My name is Haley Kottler, I am a campaign director at Kansas Appleseed Center for Law and Justice. Kansas Appleseed is a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to the belief that Kansans, working together, can build a state full of thriving, inclusive, and just communities.

Kansas Appleseed has a long history of working to increase food security to all Kansans through food assistance programs. We especially support child nutrition programs that help the most vulnerable Kansans and ensures they have every opportunity to thrive now and in the future. Simply put, we work to make sure that no child has to go hungry. As such, we support the recommendation to include \$5.5 million in the budget to cover the copay costs for breakfast and lunch each school day for families that are eligible for reduced-priced meals. Doing so will guarantee 37,000 more children in Kansas will have access to meals during the school day at a minimal cost to the state.¹

Currently, schools can offer free or reduced-price meals to their students through federal programs. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulates state administration of child nutrition programs (CNPs), including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP), and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP).² The Federal guidelines require that states provide school meals at reduced or free rates to students who meet certain financial requirements.³ Schools that choose to participate in programs such as the free and reduced lunch program are reimbursed with federal funds.⁴

School meal programs are critical to Kansas children's educational success and overall well-being, especially with childhood hunger rapidly increasing. Students who participate in school meals benefit from improved health outcomes, better test scores, fewer school absences, and less

¹ Kansas Appleseed analysis of KSDE. "Kansas K-12 Reports." KSDE Data Central.

https://datacentral.ksde.org/report_gen.aspx

² National School Lunch Act of 1946, 42 U.S.C. § 1741 *et seq.* (1946).; Child Nutrition Act of 1966, 42 U.S.C. § 1771 *et seq.* (1966); Illinois School Nutrition Association (2020) *History of School Lunch*.

<https://www.ilsna.net/resources/schoolnutrition/historyschoolnlunch>

³ 42 U.S.C.A. § 1758(b)(9).

⁴ *School Nutrition Programs*. (2024). Kansas Department of Education.

https://cnw.ksde.org/docs/default-source/reimbursement-rates/snp-cacfp_rates/2023_reimbursement_rates_nw.pdf

behavioral referrals.⁵ School meals provide children one-third or more of their recommended daily nutritional needs, and are linked with improved academic performance.⁶ Additionally, for many children, the meal(s) they receive in school may be the most nutritious meal(s) they eat in a day.⁷ One study found that two-thirds of students who participate in the meal program come from households that are not receiving any other food assistance through programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, making free school meals an especially important program for families living paycheck to paycheck.⁸

School meals are one of the most effective ways to give students from low-income households guaranteed access to food. In Kansas, 1 in 5 children do not know where their next meal is coming from. Over 130,000 children in the state face food insecurity.⁹ That number represents a rapid increase in childhood hunger in the state. In just one year, food insecurity among Kansas children has risen by 40%.¹⁰

Meal costs most impact families who are barely making ends meet. In the 2024-25 school year, 40% of Kansas students received free meals. These students have all of their meal costs subsidized through reimbursements at no cost to their families. However, families approved for reduced-price meals still need to pay a portion of school meals. The cost for families is \$0.40/lunch and \$0.30/breakfast.¹¹ These are families who face daily struggles to afford food, rent, gas, etc. but do not meet the federal level to qualify for free meals, which would entirely ease the financial stress of making sure their kids are not going hungry in school.

Poverty can persist outside of federal guidelines for these Kansas families. In Kansas, for the 2024-25 school year, a family of three must make less than \$40,560 per year in order to qualify for free meals, and less than \$57,720 to qualify for reduced-price meals.¹² Yet, according to cost of living research, a family of four (two working parents and two children) needs a combined income of over \$98,000 (before taxes) to live comfortably in Kansas.¹³ That leaves a significant gap in resources and assistance for those families eligible for reduced price meals.

Further, Kansans are working hard, but still struggling. Twelve percent of households live below the federal poverty level. However, another 27% of households do not earn enough to afford their basic needs such as housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, and taxes. These are Kansans with jobs. They are employed as truckers, retail workers, customer service representatives, nurses, cooks, personal care aides, and more.¹⁴ That means 447,000 Kansan households who work hard every

⁵ FRAC. "Reducing Barriers to Consuming School Meals." 2019.

<https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/reducing-barriers-to-consuming-school-meals.pdf> and FRAC, "The State of Healthy School Meals for All: California, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Vermont Lead the Way." 2024. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/HSMFA-Report-2024.pdf>

⁶ FRAC. "Benefits of School Lunch." 2021. <https://frac.org/programs/national-school-lunch-program/benefits-school-lunch/>; Feeding America, "Map the Meal Gap." 2023. <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2021/overall/kansas>

⁷ Jenkins, A. L. "Study Finds Americans Eat Food of Mostly Poor Nutritional Quality—Except at School." Tufts Now. 2021. <https://now.tufts.edu/2021/04/12/study-finds-americans-eat-food-mostly-poor-nutritional-quality-except-school>

⁸ Borges, M. P., ed. *National School Lunch Program Assessment: Children's Issues, Laws and Program Series*. 2009. Nova Science Publishers.

⁹ Feeding America, "Map the Meal Gap." 2023. <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2022/overall/kansas>

¹⁰ Kansas Appleseed analysis of <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2021/child/kansas>

¹¹ School Nutrition Association. "School Meal Statistics." 2024. <https://schoolnutrition.org/about-school-meals/school-meal-statistics/>

¹² Bush, A. "Reduced-price and free school meals available. KSDE Newsroom. 2023. <https://www.ksde.org/Home/Quick-Links/News-Room/ArtMID/3386/ArticleID/2356/Reduced-price-and-free-school-meals-available>

¹³ Living Wage Calculator, "Living wage calculation for Kansas." 2024. <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/20>

¹⁴ United Way. ALICE: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed Kansas Report. 2023. <https://www.unitedforalice.org/household-budgets/kansas>

day are struggling to make ends meet and are making difficult decisions about how to provide for their family's needs.¹⁵ Of those 447,000 struggling households, only about 20% are receiving food assistance.¹⁶ Free meals for their children at school could make a significant difference in their budgets.

When a family is barely making enough to get by, any savings in other areas of their budget can be used to pay other necessary expenses while not having to worry about their children going hungry. The state covering the reduced price copay for breakfasts and lunches for the previously referenced family of four (two working parents and two children) could save that family \$260.40 a year in school meal costs and grocery bills.¹⁷ This provides a larger economic savings to these families than some proposed property tax reductions at a significantly less cost to the state budget.¹⁸ Parents and school district officials have indicated that even though this might seem like a small amount, it is a huge difference for families' budgets and kids' success in the classroom.¹⁹

Kansas Appleseed has heard from countless Kansans expressing why this endeavor would be so beneficial to kids across the state:

"I am a single grandmother raising two grandchildren who attend Wichita Public Schools. We benefit from the free lunch program. I never have to worry that my grandchildren are hungry. I know they are in an environment that allows them to learn and thrive at school while I work to take care of the rest of their needs. Many of us are out here trying to do the right thing for our families. Times are hard, and we're working hard to keep up."

"Rural Vista is located in two small rural communities where food sources are scarce. There is not a grocery store in Hope nor in White City or Woodbine. We currently have 47% of our students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Providing free meals to all of these students would take a huge burden off of those families who are already struggling financially."

"As a single mother, I have benefited from free or reduced lunches throughout my child's school career; this greatly impacted the lesser levels of stress of how to fund her breakfast and lunch along with meals at home. I do, however, wish all meals were free to every child in school regardless of socioeconomic status."

"When my son was in grade school, he took his lunch to school and would share it with another child who had no lunch and had not had much for breakfast. After my son told me what he was doing, I packed an extra sandwich and piece of fruit in his lunch box. No child should go hungry because the parents are poor. How do we expect children to learn when their tummies are growling and they have the uncertainty of when they would next eat. It's easy for us with full refrigerators and cupboards to pass judgment, but not so much when you are a single parent working minimum wage jobs. Kindness begins with feeding children."

No child should have to worry about hunger while trying to learn. By covering reduced-price lunch copays for families across Kansas, we can ensure that every student has access to nutritious meals, supporting their health, and academic success. This investment not only relieves financial pressure on

¹⁵ This is the number of households below the federal poverty level and the number of struggling households combined based on the information found at: United Way. ALICE: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed Kansas Report. 2023. <https://www.unitedforalice.org/household-budgets/kansas>

¹⁶ DCF. Public Assistance Report. 2023. https://www.dcf.ks.gov/services/ees/Documents/CURRENT_PAR_SF2023.pdf

¹⁷ Kansas Appleseed calculation based on reduced price copay amounts for breakfasts and lunches.

¹⁸ KLRD economic impact analysis.

¹⁹ Sorman J. and Kelly, M. "Kansas governor wants free school meals for 36K kids. Could it make a 'huge difference'?" *Kansas City Star*. 2025. <https://www.kansascity.com/news/politics-government/article299053890.html>

families but also fosters better learning outcomes and a stronger, more equitable future for our communities. -Lillian G. Lingenfelter, President, Board of Education, Emporia Public Schools

Many of our regional neighbor states are leading the way in providing relief to families living paycheck to paycheck by eliminating the reduced price meal copay. As of 2024, 16 other states and Washington D.C. have opted to use state funds to eliminate the copay for families who qualify for reduced price meals.²⁰ Key among these states are our regional neighbors of Arkansas, Colorado, and Texas.²¹ Arkansas, under the leadership of Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders, signed a similar policy and necessary funding into law in 2023. The bill passed with 89 members of the Arkansas House of Representatives voting in favor of it and 32 members of their Senate doing the same. No member of the Arkansas Legislature voted against the bill. This was an overwhelming bipartisan vote with no opposition, initially sponsored by a Republican Senator.²² Supporting this budget recommendation would put Kansas among their peers as a leader in combating childhood hunger.

Kansas children deserve every opportunity to thrive and be successful. Reducing barriers to meals for children and families can help reduce childhood hunger, eliminate the shame low-income children may face in the school cafeteria, reduce the burden of school meal debt on schools and families, and boost academic achievement. The state paying for the reduced-priced copay for eligible students means 48 to 51% of all students in Kansas would have access to free school meals.²³ \$5.5 million is a relatively small investment in the futures of those 37,000 kids and their families who will see much needed relief in stressful economic times.

For the sake of Kansas children, I urge you to support the budget recommendation for funding to eliminate the reduced price copay for thousands of hardworking Kansas families. Doing so gives more Kansans children the tools they need to achieve a thriving future.

Thank you,
Haley Kottler

²⁰ FRAC, "School Meals Legislation and Funding by State." 2023.

<https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-State-Legislation-Chart.pdf>. Some of the 16 states referenced only eliminate the copay for reduced priced breakfasts or lunches, while others have eliminated the copay for both lunches and breakfasts.

²¹ FRAC, "School Meals Legislation and Funding by State." 2023.

<https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-State-Legislation-Chart.pdf>

²² SB 477. <https://arkleg.state.ar.us/Bills/Detail?id=SB477&ddBienniumSession=2023%2F2023R>

²³ Kansas Appleseed analysis of KSDE Data Central. "Kansas K-12 Reports and Nutrition and Wellness Reports." 2023-2024. <https://datacentral.ksde.org/default.aspx>