

Chairman Erickson and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in opposition to this bill.

My name is Ashley Hernandez, and I am offering this testimony on behalf of the Office of Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation (JPIC). Our mission is to advocate for justice and systemic change for people who are marginalized and vulnerable, guided by Catholic Social Teaching and the inherent dignity of every human person. From that perspective, we are deeply concerned that this proposal would make free or reduced school meals less accessible for Kansas children and would create new, unnecessary barriers for families and schools alike.

Food should not be a luxury; it is a foundational support that helps children arrive at school ready to learn, grow, and thrive. For many students, especially those from low-income or food-insecure households, school breakfast and lunch may be the most reliable meals they receive in a day.

I want to share a personal perspective that informs why this issue matters so deeply to me. My mother was an elementary school teacher for more than 30 years in a low-income district in San Antonio, Texas. While this experience is not from Kansas, the needs of children and families do not change by geography. Many of her students came to school hungry, with food being the primary thing on their minds. When a child is worried about where their next meal will come from, it is incredibly difficult for them to concentrate, engage, or learn.

Because of this, my mother regularly kept fruit and snacks in her classroom to make sure her students were fed and able to focus on their education. She did this not because it was part of her job description, but because she understood that meeting a child's basic needs is essential to their success. Her experience reflects what educators across the country, including in Kansas, continue to see every day: hunger is a barrier to learning.

This bill would require additional income verification and restrict schools' ability to use the Community Eligibility Provision. These changes add unnecessary paperwork, increase stigma for students, and shift focus away from education and toward bureaucracy. Kansas schools already follow federal rules to determine eligibility, and the Community Eligibility Provision has been proven to reduce red tape while ensuring students have access to nutritious meals.

Kansas should focus on protecting access to school meals and maximizing federal nutrition dollars that support children, families, and local economies. This bill moves us in the opposite direction.

For these reasons, the JPIC Office respectfully urges you to oppose this legislation and to protect school meals for Kansas students. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Ashley Hernandez

Organizing and Policy Coordinator

Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth Office of Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation