Message Subject: Oppose Indiana Legislative Bills HCR 3 and SB 314

Dear Enter Name of Recipient Here,

As your constituent and a school nutrition professional, I am writing to urge you to oppose any efforts to approve Indiana Legislative Bills HCR 3 and SB 314 to reduce stigma and lunch shaming. I, respectfully, ask that you take my professional opinion into consideration as you make vital decisions in the near future that I feel will negatively affect Indiana school districts.

School nutrition professionals are passionate about ensuring students have access to healthy school meals to support academic achievement.

No school nutrition professional wants to see a child go hungry or feel any shame during mealtime. We dedicate our lives to providing access to healthy, balanced meals to all students. While I can’t speak to every district, overwhelmingly, schools today are working to minimize any stigma associated with free or reduced-price meals and removing barriers for students in need.

School districts work diligently to enroll all eligible students in the free or reduced-price meal program. Meal assistance applications are made available to families via several avenues including mailings to every home, distribution at school registrations, and copies at all school offices. In addition, all school districts are mandated to use the direct certification process at a minimum of three times per school year. There are many school districts that offer Community Eligibility Programs (CEP) which allow for free meals to all students.

Points of service (POS) systems used in schools do not overtly identify students so even the cashier operating the POS does not know the meal assistance status of each student. Overtly identifying students has been against the law for many years, and districts adhere to these laws in the best interest of the students. On-site audits are conducted by school nutrition field specialists to identify districts that are not adhering to the laws, and corrections are made.

While federal funds cover the cost of meals for students that qualify for meal assistance, school meal programs need to charge paid students to help cover food and labor costs. Unpaid school meal debt can become a critical problem and, if left unaddressed, can impact the quality of meals offered to students and may result in reduced hours and wages for school nutrition employees. This proposed bill will increase the financial burden on school food service departments as well as the district’s general funds –funds that are difficult to keep solvent as it is.

It is a challenge to collect negative balances, and this bill will further allow parents to avoid the financial responsibility of paying their student’s meal charges. Food service operations will be challenged to stay in the black.

USDA recently issued regulations mandating that schools implement unpaid meal policies by the start of the 2017/18 school year and clarifying that schools must make efforts to collect debt incurred from unpaid meals.

Schools use a variety of methods to notify parents of low or negative account balances and to discreetly provide an alternate meal to students. Some districts continue to provide complete meals, whereas others establish funds to support students without lunch money or work with parents to establish payment plans. Communicating the unpaid meal policy with the school community across all channels is vital to any policy’s successful implementation.

The term “meal shaming” is a sensational media term that stirs people up due to its negative connotation and is not caused by district charge policies. School food service authorities will find themselves caught in the middle. We will be expected to be financially solvent; however, these proposed bills will make that expectation very difficult to accomplish.

I believe that the proposed Legislative Bills, HCR 3 and SB 314, are not necessary and that the USDA regulations are sufficient in this area. These bills, as well intended as they may appear, will have unintended consequences, and the school food service operations will pay the price.

I would invite you to visit some of Indiana’s school meal service programs to witness, firsthand, the real story that is taking place in the vast majority of Indiana schools today.

Providing healthy school meals is just as important as the textbooks that students receive for academic achievement. School nutrition professionals, anti-hunger advocates, school communities, and legislators must all work together to establish effective policies that ensure compassion for students and emphasize open communication with families without driving school meal program debt.

Thank you for your time, and please feel free to reach out to me with any questions.

Sincerely,

Name of Sender

Title

School District

Phone Number with Area Code

Email Address