



TO: Education Committee  
FROM: Jeremy Ekeler, Associate Director of Education Policy  
Nebraska Catholic Conference  
DATE: March 14, 2023  
RE: (LB627) (Free Student Meals Act) (Support)

The Nebraska Catholic Conference advocates for the public policy interests of the Catholic Church and advances the Gospel of Life through engaging, educating, and empowering public officials, Catholic laity, and the general public.

Senator Bostar and his office included the Catholic Conference very early in the process of this bill. They were able to learn about our dynamics and mission schools<sup>1</sup>. They established correctly that food insecurity and hunger issues impact kids in all types of schools. We appreciate that approach very much.

And so, on behalf of our 112 schools, 2500 educators, and 27,000 students, the Conference voices its support LB627 for three reasons.

First, the Catholic Church prioritizes taking care of, and giving preference to, the vulnerable in society. As a matter of fact, “feeding the hungry” is often listed first when discussing the Corporal Works of Mercy<sup>2</sup>. LB627 honors this premise by prioritizing schools that reside in Community Eligibility Provision areas<sup>3</sup> where food insecurity is most likely to occur<sup>4</sup>. First it uses the CEP model to create efficiency for schools serving breakfasts and lunch to our highest-poverty areas. Second, the meals for students in these schools are fully refunded after all other federal funding has been maximized.

Secondly, LB627 upholds the Church’s teaching on subsidiarity<sup>5</sup> because the bill allows schools to opt-in to the program if they find it helpful for their communities. This contrasts with many of the other meal program bills around the country that either mandate or automatically opt schools into the program. By providing LB627 as an opportunity decision-making is retained at the local level.

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<sup>1</sup> The six CUES, three Consortium, and Saint Augustine’s Winnebago schools are examples.

<sup>2</sup> CCC Paragraph 2447: Feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, and bury the dead.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.education.ne.gov/ns/forms-resources/national-school-lunch-program/community-eligibility-provision-cep/> Community eligibility provision means the alternative to household applications for free and reduced-price meals in high-poverty schools enacted in section 104(a) of the federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, section 11(a)(1) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act, 42 U.S.C. 1759a(a)(1), as such act and section existed on January 1, 2015, and administered by the United States Department of Agriculture

<sup>4</sup> According to the USDA, in households with children, food insecurity indicates at least one person in the household experienced reductions in dietary quality or variety and, in some cases, disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake. However, household food insecurity may be experienced differently across household members.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.catholic.com/qa/what-is-subsidiarity> Subsidiarity is the principle that matters ought to be handled at the lowest competent authority before higher levels are engaged.

Lastly, a few figures to provide support for this concept. Almost 10% of Nebraskans are food insecure with large swaths of the most vulnerable in rural areas.<sup>6</sup> Second, the large fiscal notes for LB627 and the other school meal bills point to the national trend of programs like LB627<sup>7</sup> to address student hunger issues: There are over 30 programs now enacted across the country using creative ideas like “sin” taxes to support reimbursements, various threshold markers for eligibility (like fresh foods or implementation of programs like our own “Farm to School”<sup>8</sup>), and support for staffing of food service personnel.

The Conference thanks Senators Bostar and Walz (LB285) for considering nonpublic schools in their school meal bills and looks forward to future discussion around helping children most in need.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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<sup>6</sup> Feeding America interactive map; the national average is 11.8%. In 2018 LRO reported that 16.7% of Nebraska children were food insecure: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2022/february/food-insecurity-for-households-with-children-rose-in-2020-disrupting-decade-long-decline/>

<sup>7</sup> School Meals State Legislation Chart: <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-State-Legislation-Chart.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.education.ne.gov/ns/farm-to-school/>