

Good morning, Chair Weiss and members of the School Aid and Education sub-committee. I appreciate the opportunity to join you today to discuss the impact that the MI School Meals program is having this year for over 160K students in classrooms across Oakland County. My name is Lori Adkins. I am a Child Nutrition professional and advocate for MI School Meals, and I work as the Child Nutrition Consultant at Oakland Schools. Along with my testimony today, I have shared a comparison data spreadsheet with the committee that outlines enrollment, participation, and eligibility trends for school meal programs in Oakland County, comparing data from October 2022 to October 2023. The raw data for this spreadsheet was supplied by MDE's Office of Nutrition Services.

I am happy to report that the MI School Meals program has been a great success this year in Oakland County, where school meals play a critical role in eliminating hunger as a barrier to learning in the classroom. In Oakland County alone, schools are serving more than 38K school breakfast meals each morning, reflecting an increase of over 20K more breakfast meals per day when compared to October 2022. This represents a percentage increase of over 116%! In addition, Oakland County schools are serving on average over 85K school lunch meals daily, marking an uptick of 27K more lunch meals per day as compared to October 2022. This is a 47% increase. As a percentage of enrollment, the Oakland County Free Eligible rate is at 38% (up 4% from last year), and the Reduced Eligibility rate as a percentage of enrollment is at 1.6% (down from 2.2% in Oct of 2022). The data also shows that while the total number of all meals served has increased across the board in every district as a percentage of enrollment, county enrollment has nearly stayed flat across the county year over year.

One of the most significant impacts of Michigan School Meals has been on school breakfast access and participation. As a mandatory component of the MI School Meals program, all school districts and buildings now provide breakfast, which has led to the implementation of new programs in some buildings that had never offered breakfast before. As a result, school breakfast ADP (average daily participation) is the highest in the history of Oakland County. In an effort to implement new breakfast programs, many

districts have adopted innovative service models such as Breakfast in the Classroom, Hallway Breakfast Kiosks, and even 2nd chance breakfast or breakfast after the bell. These approaches have resulted in a remarkable increase in participation by equitably reaching students where they are each morning—in the hallway, in the classroom, or in the cafeteria—with a healthy school meal to start their day.

Prior to the pandemic in 2018, Oakland Schools collaborated with the United Way of Southeast Michigan and the Oakland County Board of Commissioners to launch the Oakland County Better with Breakfast program. This universal breakfast initiative specifically targeted high-need areas that struggled with historically low participation rates. The program provided funding for new equipment and covered costs for both reduced and paid category students, thus creating a universal free breakfast program—the first of its kind in Oakland County and in the State.

Then, in March of 2023, the Oakland County Government joined forces with Oakland Schools to introduce the Elimination of the Financial Burden of Reduced-Price Meals initiative that ran March through June of last year. This partnership aimed to eradicate reduced-price student meal fees and reduced-price student meal debt, while simultaneously addressing the challenge of school meal stigma for reduced-price eligible students. Both initiatives, although interrupted by the pandemic or having since expired, proved to be successful demonstration pilots in showcasing the benefits of universal meal programming. That's why we in Oakland County are so very pleased that Michigan School Meals has provided a new and potentially sustainable path forward across the entire state in providing universal healthy school breakfast and lunch meals for all students each day.

While the program has been a great success, it hasn't come without challenges. Staffing has been a top challenge for nearly all district programs this year. Most schools are serving more meals with fewer or the same staffing levels as last year. The addition of new breakfast programs and the increased number of lunch meals served has required extra work hours by staff for food prep and meal service time. That's

why service efficiency has become of paramount importance. To ensure all students get through the line, some districts have added additional lunch hours or have overlapped lunch hours. Other schools have allowed students to pick up meals in the cafeteria and then return to the classroom. This provides the students with more time to eat and less time in the queue. Also, with less labor, many districts are simply focused on meal service only—a la carte sales have been discontinued in many districts simply because they don't have the staff to sell it.

Another challenge has been increased food and supply costs for programs. Food and supply costs have increased by double digits, and while some food costs have decreased (like the cost of eggs), other food items have been slower to come down. In addition, school operators across the nation, including in Oakland County, have received fewer federal dollars for USDA Foods this year. After a temporary bump in entitlement rates last year, rates were adjusted (reduced) and calculated against fewer school meals served in 2022-23. This resulted in fewer commodity entitlement dollars available for Oakland County districts to use at a time where we're serving more meals than ever.

Some good news this year is that pandemic-era supply chain issues have been largely resolved for many food items and supplies. This year, fill rates by our broadline distributors are in the high 90th percentile for many items; however, the turn-around time on large items like equipment still can be lengthy.

One of the early challenges to MI School Meals was the collection of Educational Benefit Forms. The challenge for all districts is that students do not have to apply for the MI School Meals program, yet school districts are tasked with coding each student in their electronic POS system as Free, Reduced, or Paid eligible for the purpose of meal claiming and reimbursements. Also, families identified as economically disadvantaged are entitled to several additional benefits including summer EBT benefits, as well as waived school fees like college placement testing and pay-to-play fees. School districts also

rely on economically disadvantaged data for e-rate, some title funding as well as grant opportunities. MDE took proactive measures early on by providing program branding and a logo for MI School Meals as well as FAQ sheets for districts to create awareness of the new program as well as conveying the importance of Educational Benefit Forms for all stakeholders.

Lastly this morning, I'd like to share a brief video produced by Oakland schools and filmed at South Lyon Community Schools and the Walled Lake Consolidated School District, in which some Oakland County students, food service directors, and a parent share, in their own words, about the impact that the MI School Meals program and eating at school has had on their school experience this year.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yG7cEHj5vBY>

Clearly, we have made significant progress in Oakland County towards eliminating hunger by providing access to healthy and delicious meals to students each day. At this time, I urge the committee for your continued support of MI School Meals. In Child Nutrition there's a saying "We need to be successful in nutrition because our students can't be successful without it".

Thank you for your time this morning. I'd be happy to answer any questions.