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March 3, 2026

The Honorable Hanna Gallo
Chair, Senate Committee on Education
Rhode Island State House
82 Smith Street, Providence, RI 02903

RE: S2635

On behalf of NEARI, I write in strong support of Senate Bill 2635 to establish protections against excessive and hidden fees associated with student school meal accounts.

This legislation represents a straightforward and necessary consumer protection measure. Families who deposit money into school meal accounts do so for one purpose: to ensure their children are fed and ready to learn. Those dollars should go toward providing meals and not toward unnecessary or profit-generating processing fees.

Working families across Rhode Island are already managing rising household costs. Even seemingly small transaction fees add up over the course of a school year, particularly for families with multiple children or those who must make frequent smaller deposits. No parent should be required to pay extra simply to put money on their child's lunch account.

It is important to note that this legislation does not prohibit reasonable cost recovery. It allows meal service collection providers to impose fees that directly correspond to actual processing costs, while prohibiting charges designed to generate profit or administrative gain. The reasonable 2% cap establishes clear boundaries and accountability while still allowing vendors to operate responsibly.

Equally critical is the requirement that every school district provide at least one no-fee payment option. Access to student meals should never depend on a family's ability to absorb electronic transaction fees. Guaranteeing a no-fee option ensures fairness and equity for all families, regardless of income or payment method.

The bill's transparency provisions are also essential. Families deserve clear, conspicuous disclosure of any fees before completing a transaction, along with clear notice of available no-fee alternatives. Transparency builds trust between families and schools and ensures informed decision-making.

Finally, by directing the Rhode Island Department of Education to create and oversee uniform statewide standards, this legislation promotes consistency, strengthens vendor accountability, and ensures that public and family meal funds are used primarily for their intended purpose: feeding students.

At its core, this bill protects families, promotes fairness, and keeps school meal dollars where they belong—in the cafeteria, supporting student health and academic success.

We respectfully urge you to support this important legislation.

Sincerely,

Alexander Lucini
Government Relations Director, NEARI