

To: House Committee on Education

From: Mohammad Bader, MS,LPC | Interim Director, Department of County Human Services
Peggy Samolinski | Director, Youth and Family Services Division

Date: March 16, 2021

RE: Testimony on HB 2536

Chair Alonzo Leon and Members of the House Committee on Education,

We are writing in support of HB 2536, which establishes clear expanded eligibility guidelines (up to 300% poverty level for student families) for schools to offer free school meals to students.

Research shows that children who access school meals attend more days of school, improve test scores, are more likely to graduate, and earn more as adults. In Multnomah County, we see this reality every day in our schools, especially in schools with high numbers of BIPOC students and students living in poverty. This was true before the pandemic and, like other basic needs, the need has only grown during COVID-19 with increased poverty, school closures and distance learning.

In Oregon, 1 in 3 kids who experience hunger wouldn't normally qualify for free school meals because of their family income. In response to this, lawmakers prioritized expanding income eligibility for free school meals as part of the Student Success Act in 2019. This was a step toward creating universal school meals. The language of the current statute, however, puts the burden on schools to "opt in" to implementing expanded income eligibility, rather than participation being the default. This creates the potential for some students facing hunger to have unequal access to free school meals, depending on the district in which they live.

Equitable access to free school meals is both a social and racial justice issue. Multnomah County partners with local schools to deliver meals during the summer and after school (suppers), as well as supporting school-based food pantries. We focus on schools in the most vulnerable communities, where a majority of the students are BIPOC. We see firsthand how unequal application of eligibility and access affect our community, especially our youngest members. The availability of free school meals during the pandemic regardless of income has been a tremendous support for our children and families this year. We need expanded eligibility in the future to support our children to reach their full potential at school, regardless of where they attend.

This is why we are urging you and other lawmakers to ensure that all schools participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) will automatically have Expanded Income Eligibility for free school meals.

This change does not require additional dollars, as the legislature already set aside the funding in 2019. What HB 2536 does is give Oregon consistent, expanded eligibility guidelines for students at all schools that are serving school meals and collecting income applications.

We at Multnomah County support HB 2536 and ask that you take this important step to adjust the statute to reflect the intent of the Student Success Act and ensure all students facing hunger and food insecurity have access to nutritious meals at their school.

Thank you,

Mohammad Bader, MS,LPC
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Department of County Human Services

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