



Testimony in Support of Universal School Meals, HB 2760

To: House Committee on Education

From: Whitney Ellersick, MS, RDN, Senior Director, Nutrition Services

Subject: Statement of support for HB 2760

Date: February 27, 2019

Portland Public Schools is submitting this letter in support of HB 2760.

Portland Public Schools was one of the early adopters of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Program, a universal meal program where are students eat at no charge. With 25 CEP schools, PPS had one of the largest number of schools approved for CEP in the state. Provisions and programs like CEP can be the model for how school meals can be – focusing on nourishing the child rather than their economic status and whether or not they have money to eat. It has shown how one change can address some systematic root issues, break down barriers and stigmas, and start the culture change for incorporating food and nutrition into the school day.

Portland Public Schools immediately saw the benefits of the program and where change was needed. One of the areas of change included the financial commitment of the district in order to implement and support CEP in the schools regardless of whether they qualified for the program.

CEP has a positive impact on the cafeteria environment by allowing all students to eat at no charge and reducing the stigma associated with eating school meals. Portland Public Schools saw lunch participation double in high schools even with an open campus. Parents visiting their students' schools during registration cried and were overwhelmingly grateful when finding out that the cost of school meals would be taken care of for them. CEP has reduced barriers for families seeking assistance by streamlining processes,

eliminating paperwork and allowing families to participate in programs for which they already qualify. Families attending these schools who do not qualify for free and reduced priced meals also benefit from CEP. These families often struggle to financially cover all of their expenses and are making hard choices as to whether to pay to heat their home or purchase food. With changes to assistance benefits like SNAP, increasing children's access to food covers the gap often needed for families.

Due to federal rules regarding boundary changes and grade changes to CEP schools along with changes within the community, Portland Public Schools transitioned 12 schools off of CEP in the 2017-18 school year. Without additional support and funding like that proposed in these House Bills, the district could not support the ongoing additional costs (\$700,000 per year) to maintain the CEP status at these 12 schools. This was an extremely difficult decision - it is not what is best for students, but realistically, the district could not sustain funding this model while continuing to provide all programs and quality services to all students. This change means that instead of over 12,000 students eating at no charge, only about 4,800 students are able to participate in this program, which is a loss and decrease in benefits for about 7,200 students. Since that change, we have seen frustration from families, students choosing not to eat school meals, barriers and stigmas arise in the cafeteria environment, and a rise in unpaid meal debt for school meals.

House Bill 2760 would help districts continue to provide the best services for Oregon students, allowing families to focus on their students' academic success rather than where they will find their next meal. Child Nutrition Programs ensure that students are well nourished and ready to learn. Oregon has often been seen as a national leader and progressive state when it comes to food, nutrition and wellness for its citizens, and the support from these bills would only strengthen this by moving forward with more equitable and accessible food services for our children.