



To: House Education Committee
From: Annie Kirschner, Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon
RE: Statement of Support for Universal School Meals (HB 2760) and
Breakfast After the Bell (HB 2765)
Date: February 27, 2019

*"Research and experience show us that school meals
boost student achievement, attendance, graduation, and earnings later in life."*
-Joint Committee on Student Success, Students Ready and Able to Learn Workgroup

Chair Doherty and Members of the Committee,

My name is Annie Kirschner, and I am the Executive Director of Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon. We raise awareness about hunger, connect people to nutrition programs, and advocate for systemic changes to end hunger.

I've spent the past 14 years working to address child hunger and to expand access to child nutrition programs in our state.

Oregon has a historic opportunity in 2019 to invest to in our future by investing in our kids. There are so many good and worthy ideas that deserve support: boosting graduation rates, support for connecting students to careers, supporting mental health, offering high quality preschool.

All of these things priorities will work even better when kids sitting in class are well-nourished and able to focus on learning instead of a grumbling stomach. School meals improve school performance, lead to better health and contribute to economic security in the long run. It's an investment that really pays off.

I know this from research and from listening to families across our state. I also know this as someone who avoided hunger in part because free school meals were there for me as a kid. Now as a parent to three kids who eat school breakfast and lunch every day, I also see clearly how we can do more.

One in three kids who live in a food insecure household in Oregon don't qualify for free school meals. Families who earn just over the limit can face bills of \$75 a month *per child* to eat at school. On top of that, most students arrive at school after breakfast has been served.

We have a historic opportunity to ensure no child goes hungry while at school. Today, I am asking you to support two policy improvements for Oregon's kids:

- **HB 2760: Offer meals to all students at no charge (Universal School Meals).** Oregon can boost student success by becoming the first state to offer meals to all kids regardless of ability to pay.
- **HB 2765: Serve "Breakfast After the Bell" in schools with high poverty rates.** Schools can ensure every student has the opportunity to eat breakfast and start the day strong.

Together, these efforts to improve access to school meals will have game-changing impacts for the health and learning environment for all students. Combined, I believe these policies would eliminate hunger for kids at school.

These Policies Get Results

- **Student Success.** Students who eat breakfast at school attend more days of school, show improvements in test scores, graduate at higher rates and earn more as adults. When children constantly get the food they need, they learn more.
- **Reduces stigma and increases participation.** Universal meals level the playing field for all students. Kids no longer feel singled out for going through the hot meal line, particularly in middle and high schools where students are more likely to eat if their peers do. It's just classmates breaking bread together.
- **Equity.** In this time of fear and uncertainty around immigration, reports are widespread of immigrant families being reluctant to apply for benefits for which they're legally eligible - including school meals. No child should go without a meal due to fear.
- **Centers the needs of kids and working parents.** In listening circles with parents and students, the idea of universal meals emerged as a key issue. The federal income guidelines aren't aligned with the realities of the cost of living in Oregon. And we heard from working parents about the challenge of breakfast on busy mornings.
- **Works for schools.** Currently, 340 out of 1,200 schools in Oregon serve meals to all students at no charge, but federal funding formulas leave many schools and students behind. Oregon can step in and fill that gap. Oregon ranks 31st in the nation in terms of the percentage of kids who eat school breakfast relative to eating school lunch. Schools that offer breakfast after the bell have higher participation rates. Higher participation means more resources for schools to invest into the quality of the food.
- **No more School Meal Debt.** That's good for families and schools.

In order to ensure these bills have their intended impact, we believe the bills will need amendments, and we would like to submit our recommendations. Briefly, these would be to:

HB 2760

- **Ensure Reliability of Funding.** For this to be successful, it will be crucial that schools credibly believe that an adequate level of funding will be available and will not run out mid-school year.
- **Clarify reimbursement.** There should be a per-meal cap that aligns with established USDA reimbursement levels.



HB 2765

- **Prioritize schools with high rates of poverty and low rates of breakfast participation.** We recommend setting a threshold, so the bill applies to schools with 70% or more students qualify for free or reduced price meals. If schools are already serving a high percent of students breakfast, they should be able to request a waiver to serve breakfast before the bell.
- **Give schools resources, flexibility and accountability.** Provide small grants for 1-time equipment needs to serve breakfast after the bell. Be explicit about the flexibility in how breakfast may be served, and require annual reporting to ensure compliance.

The legislature has the opportunity to make good on the declaration the state made 30 years ago that “All people have the right to be free from hunger.” Yes, there is a cost to eliminating hunger. But the cost of our current system is being shouldered by families whose budgets are stretched to the max, by teachers who buy food to keep in their desks, by schools who try to pick up the tab, and most of all by students who are sacrificing their potential over the cost of a meal.

In today's panel, you will hear from others about the profound impact these policies would have on the everyday lives of students and the schools that serve them. I ask that the Committee support HB 2760 and HB 2765 to ensure that Oregon's students have a healthy foundation for success in school and in life.