



Senate Committee on Education
May 4th, 2021
Re: Support for HB 2536

Chair Dembrow, Vice-Chair Thomsen and Members of the Committee,

My name is Aaron Poplack. I am the Oregon Associate Director of Programs at FoodCorps in Portland, and I am writing to request your support for **HB 2536**.

In Oregon, 1 in 3 kids who experience hunger wouldn't normally qualify for free school meals because of their family income. Yet children who access school meals are shown to attend more days of school, improve test scores, be more likely to graduate, and earn more as adults. Free school meals during the pandemic has made a huge impact in the communities FoodCorps serves this year.

Lawmakers prioritized expanding income eligibility for free school meals in the Student Success Act in 2019, as a step toward creating universal school meals. Yet the interpretation of the current statute puts the burden on schools to "opt in" to implementing expanded income eligibility, rather than this being the default. This creates the potential for some students facing hunger to have unequal access to free school meals, depending on where they live.

The legislature already set aside the funding in 2019. The language just needs to be fixed. HB 2536 makes it clear that Oregon will have consistent, expanded eligibility guidelines (up to 300% poverty level) for students at all schools that are serving school meals and collecting income applications.

Research shows that the school meal programs are effective not only in alleviating food insecurity and poverty but also improving academic outcomes. We don't charge for resources that we know are essential to student learning, like textbooks and school bus rides. So why do we charge students for something as vital as food? By expanding access to school meals through the EIE, and fixing the current "opt-in" interpretation of the bill, Oregon is leading the way in ensuring every student has what they need to be academically successful and graduate on time.

All of Oregon's students deserve the opportunity to reach their full potential at school, regardless of where they attend. It is simpler, more efficient, and more equitable to expand income eligibility consistently statewide to all schools that fall within the legislated criteria. We urge lawmakers to ensure that all schools participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) - but that do not offer universal school meals through CEP - will automatically become a school with Expanded Income Eligibility for free school meals.

Thank you for the consideration and again, I ask for your support of **HB 2536**.

Aaron Poplack, Oregon Associate Director of Programs, FoodCorps

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