



## **Toward School Meals for All in Oregon:**

Listening to the experiences of students, families, and professionals

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..... 2**

**INTRODUCTION ..... 2**

**THEMES..... 3**

    Barriers to accessing school meals have returned ..... 3

    Perception of meal quality remains low ..... 4

    Ensure kids have enough time to eat and play ..... 4

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ..... 5**

    School Meals for All ..... 5

        Recommendation: Ensure that Oregon’s public schools serve meals at no cost to students. .... 6

        Recommendation: Oregon should expand the successful Breakfast-after-the-Bell grant program to include all eligible schools. .... 6

    Invest in School Meal Quality ..... 6

        Recommendation: Ensure schools operating universal meal programs are reimbursed at a minimum of 100% of the federal free rate..... 7

        Recommendation: Invest in the Oregon Farm to School Grant program changes brought by the Oregon Farm to School and School Garden Network. .... 7

        Recommendation: Support the equipment and infrastructure needs of Oregon’s School Foods Programs through a one-time grant infusion..... 8

        Recommendation: Develop a stakeholder process that investigates and recommends opportunities to improve student and parent voices in meal planning and menus that reflect Oregon’s diverse cultural and religious landscape. .... 9

    Ensure Kids Have Enough Time to Eat and Play ..... 9

        Recommendation: Oregon should ensure a minimum of 20 minutes of seat time for students during school lunches and incentivize the adoption of recess before lunch. .... 9

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all of the community partners who helped us host listening sessions, sat with us for one-on-one meetings, or connected us to community groups. We are especially grateful to the students, caregivers, and school nutrition professionals who showed up to our listening sessions, bravely shared openly and honestly about their personal

experiences, and provided feedback and suggestions to take to policy leaders with the intent of making real change in Oregon's communities.

## INTRODUCTION

From January through July of 2024, the Oregon School Meals for All coalition hosted listening sessions – conversations with stakeholders in the school meal program, including school nutrition professionals and families and/or students who are accessing school meals in public schools across Oregon. A total of 219 participants engaged in a listening session.

A consistent conversation guide was used in each listening session, though flexibility was encouraged. The majority of listening sessions were led in English and simultaneously translated to Spanish. The sessions lasted 60-90 minutes, and not every session made it to each question on the guide. Notes from these sessions were combined and analyzed by counting the number of times a theme or issue was raised. This process revealed three overarching categories of feedback:

1. Expand and ensure universal access
2. Improve meal quality
3. Ensure kids have enough time to eat and play

## THEMES

### Barriers to accessing school meals have returned

In each of the listening sessions, participants acknowledged that school meals are not reaching all of the students that they should. When universal school meal policies were implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic, this shared experience left a lasting positive impression on students, families, and school professionals. This shared experience left them with a lived experience of the value of the program.

***“Universal meals would definitely help reduce stress in kids who come from families who are struggling.”***

The loss of universal meals at the end of the public health emergency declaration was disruptive and traumatic for students, parents, and school professionals. The uncertainty of whether and where School Meals for All is implemented has resulted in demands for certainty and reliability.

***“I am eligible for free food but I didn’t even eat. I feel awful that my friends can’t even get free food. They starve instead.”***

Returning to universal school meals would allow more students to eat, reduce stress on families and students, and create a more equitable lunchroom experience.

### Perception of meal quality remains low

During our listening sessions, the quality of food was brought up frequently throughout all demographics. It appears that despite often stringent federal nutrition guidelines, school menus vary quite drastically across districts and even schools within districts. Both parents and school nutrition professionals are concerned about the food quality being delivered to the students. We repeatedly heard comments about there being not enough fresh fruits and vegetables and too much-processed food. Students and parents shared that there were little to no options for allergy or diet-conforming meals.

Many of the parents we heard from do not feel like the meals are healthy, balanced, culturally affirming, or fulfilling. For those who can afford to pay for school meals, perceived poor-quality food is the reason they choose not to purchase meals for their child. For those accessing free or reduced meals, the largest complaint was children coming home hungry due to small portions, or not feeling well after eating. This was a particular theme in our listening session with Spanish-speaking families in the Multnomah and Clackamas counties - many parents reported children feeling ill after eating school meals. Student listening sessions showed a particular interest in providing diet and allergy-specific meals, including vegetarian or vegan meals, halal meals, and gluten-free meals. For those producing or serving school

meals, professionals feel constrained by restrictive federal standards, low reimbursement rates, and difficulty staffing kitchens and cafeterias.

*There aren't many options for those with dietary restrictions and they are often left with the same low-quality option day after day - Oregon High School Student*

*“When you buy food from stores, it shows nutritional values. They should do that with school food too! Especially for kids with allergies this is difficult. Could put this [information] on the school calendar” - Oregon High School Student*

### Ensure kids have enough time to eat and play

We also heard that the ways in which meals are served or delivered to students vary quite dramatically between schools and districts within the state.

The concern that we heard most often was: the kids need more time to eat. Most schools offer an average of about 25 minutes for lunchtime, which includes the time needed to get to the lunchroom, stand in line and get your food, and find a table. We heard many complaints that students who stood in line for their meal did not have enough time to complete that meal. Students that relied on school meals often shared that they would run to lunch in order to get to the front of the line. Students who had recess immediately following lunch would eat their meal as quickly as possible in order to have a longer lunch.

As universal meal programs have become more popular, far more students are eating school breakfast and lunch. This is good news for food access but creates a logistical challenge if lunch schedules are not adjusted to accommodate increased meal service.

*having a longer lunchtime would be preferable in order to cut down on the 5 minutes to eat type situation - Oregon High School Student*

Students feel rushed - to complete their meal, or to get outside for recess. Many parents challenged the current structure of lunch before recess and asked if there could be an option for recess to happen before lunch so that kids could eat their lunches without feeling like they would miss the opportunity to play. Space was another real concern we heard consistently.

Cafeteria eating space is limited which impacts the time available to eat since students have to move through to make room for the next group. Kitchen and food prep space is limited making freshly prepared meals more challenging. One suggestion was to create eating spaces outdoors as we had during the social distancing of the pandemic which could allow for more time to eat for some students.

*“The whole meal process is rushed. Some schools allow them extra time, but kids still rush out for social/play time. It’s like an assembly line. Meal time should be social, relaxed and have at least 30 min to eat. I’ve watched kids shovel food in their faces”*

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### School Meals for All

As we head into 2025, eight [states](#) across the country have now established permanent, statewide School Meals for All programs. These historic investments have brought [countless benefits](#) to students, families, schools, and communities. They also signal growing momentum across the country towards universal school meals—a movement galvanized by universal meal service during the pandemic.

While Oregon has yet to join the cohort of states with permanent School Meals for All legislation, new state funding is available to eligible schools during the 2024-2025 school year. This is an incremental step towards expanding free school meals statewide as federal action to secure free school meals nationwide remains stagnant.

Without a School Meals for All policy, schools and families must shoulder the administrative and financial burdens of a tiered, means-tested program. Schools must collect, process, and verify applications from thousands of families, then also contend with unpaid meal debt when families are unable to pay. Among potentially eligible families there are still significant barriers to applying, such as social stigma and fear, especially for those who are undocumented.

By providing free school meals to all students through School Meals for All, we can eliminate these barriers. Moreover, the administrative and financial savings generated by School Meals

for All would increase school nutrition departments' capacity for innovative programming that can combat rising food prices, improve the nutritional quality of meals served, and better engage students (e.g. through nutrition education and farm-to-school initiatives).

**Recommendation: *Ensure that Oregon's public schools serve meals at no cost to students.***

### **School Breakfast in Particular Boosts Achievement**

Students who eat breakfast at school are more likely to have better attendance, perform better on tests, avoid disciplinary issues at school, and graduate<sup>1</sup>. Yet Oregon ranks 27th among states in terms of breakfast participation relative to lunch. Schools that use breakfast service models like "Breakfast after the Bell" see lower chronic absenteeism and higher levels of proficiency in math.

**Recommendation: *Oregon should expand the successful Breakfast-after-the-Bell grant program to include all eligible schools.***

### Invest in School Meal Quality

Oregon's Student Success Act provides additional funding to Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) schools through the Community Eligibility Incentive (CEP-I), ensuring the program is financially feasible and encouraging more CEP-eligible schools to participate in the provision. Oregon's CEP-I program supplements the federal reimbursements, but it still reaches only 90% of the federal free rate - meaning that many schools are choosing to serve meals to all students at a lower reimbursement rate. Often, child nutrition program operators must cut costs elsewhere to make up for the financial difference, which has led to a system of lower-quality ingredients, underpaid staff, and outdated or dysfunctional equipment.

This policy was designed in 2019 when Oregon was the first state in the nation to implement such an incentive. Since then, the eight states that have moved to a School Meals for All

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine-Thottungal, Kern, Key, Sherman. *Ending childhood hunger: A social Impact Analysis*. Deloitte, 2013

policy reimburse their schools at 100% of the federal free rate, recognizing that amount as the minimum required to serve a quality meal to students.

School Meals for All provides the much-needed stability and certainty for schools to provide the best possible meals to our kids. By freeing up time and ensuring a fair reimbursement, food service directors can focus on training kitchen staff, sourcing local produce, and introducing children to diverse fruits and vegetables.

***Recommendation: Ensure schools operating universal meal programs are reimbursed at a minimum of 100% of the federal free rate.***

Farm-to-school enriches the connection communities have with fresh, healthy food and local food producers by enhancing food purchasing and education practices at schools and early care and education sites. Farm to school empowers children and their families to make informed food choices while strengthening the local economy and contributing to vibrant communities. Oregon is fortunate to have a long history of supporting local farmers and producers through school food sourcing and the Oregon Farm to School Grant Program. Continued investment and refining of this program is a key opportunity to increase high-quality, locally sourced ingredients in school foods.

***Recommendation: Invest in the Oregon Farm to School Grant program changes brought by the Oregon Farm to School and School Garden Network.***

As schools adopt universal meal programs to ensure that all students have access to nutritious meals, the increased demand for school meals has led to longer service times. This results in reduced seat time for students, which can negatively impact their academic performance and overall well-being. Many schools are struggling to efficiently serve the growing number of meals due to outdated and insufficient food service equipment, exacerbating the problem and placing additional strain on food service staff.

To address this challenge, providing one-time equipment grants to schools is essential. These grants would enable schools to modernize their aging food service equipment, improving efficiency and reducing meal service times. By upgrading equipment, schools can better meet the demands of universal meal programs, ensuring that all students receive timely meals



while maximizing their seat time in the classroom. This investment in school infrastructure supports both student health and academic success.

**Recommendation: Support the equipment and infrastructure needs of Oregon's School Foods Programs through a one-time grant infusion.**

Experts have found that the number one way to decrease food waste in school cafeterias is to serve quality food that students want to eat. Food waste is only one of many challenges that can be addressed by better tailoring meal options to student preferences – whether it is culturally relevant meals that students see in their homes, plant-based, kosher, or Halal meals that reflect the diversity of diets across Oregon. School nutrition professionals across the state are experimenting with different strategies to respond to student preferences and cultural or religious diets, but a patchwork of options exists.

Schools are required to accommodate special dietary needs due to a disability or food allergen. Districts have those policies on their websites. Some schools may have students show meal cards that discreetly identify special dietary needs. Sometimes a teacher assists younger students with food allergies in the serving line. But even when disability or allergy-friendly alternatives are available, the menu often repeats a single menu item over weeks or months.

States are experimenting with giving students and families more opportunities to shape school meal programs – Colorado is in the beginning stages of developing Parent and Student Advisory Committees. These committees give decision-making power to students and parents to advise their district on food selection to ensure meals are culturally relevant, healthy and appealing. Colorado is the first state in the nation to establish these committees statewide.

“Would love it if parents could be cooks in the school. Let the parents come up with the menus that are reflective of what is served at home, or is fresh.”

“It would really help to get a wide perspective from all students and staff, allowing for school officials to take a look at feedback received and make way for voices that otherwise wouldn't be heard” - Oregon High School Student

**Recommendation: Develop a stakeholder process that investigates and recommends opportunities to improve student and parent voices in meal planning and menus that reflect Oregon’s diverse cultural and religious landscape.**

### Ensure Kids Have Enough Time to Eat and Play

The lack of time to eat is a frustration for students, parents, and school administrators. States that have adopted state-wide universal meal programs have reported decreased “seat time” for students as the policy is first implemented due to rapid increases in the number of meals served. Research shows that students benefit when they have at least 20 minutes of “seat time” to eat meals<sup>2</sup>. And best practices like "recess before lunch" are good for kids. Kids who have enough time to eat are more likely to eat more fruits and vegetables and waste less food.

**Recommendation: Oregon should ensure a minimum of 20 minutes of seat time for students during school lunches and incentivize the adoption of recess before lunch.**

### **School Meals for All Coalition**

Every child in Oregon deserves to have the food they need to learn and grow. School Meals for All is a coalition of organizations, students and parents, teachers and cafeteria workers, food producers, and other advocates, united in our work to secure a values-aligned, universal school meal program for Oregon.

[www.schoolmealsoregon.org](http://www.schoolmealsoregon.org)

### **Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon**

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<sup>2</sup> Cohen, Jahn, Richardson, Cluggish, et al. *The Amount of Time to Eat Lunch is Associated with Children's Selection and Consumption of School Meal Entrée, Fruits, Vegetable, and Milk*. Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2017.

Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon works with the community to end hunger before it begins. We envision an Oregon where everyone is healthy and thriving, with access to affordable, nutritious and culturally-appropriate food. To bring that vision into reality, we raise awareness about hunger, connect people to nutrition programs, and advocate for systemic changes.

[www.oregonhunger.org](http://www.oregonhunger.org)