

TO: House Committee on Education
FROM: Matt Newell-Ching, Senior Policy Manager
RE: Support for HB 3030 (amended) - Healthy School Meals for All Task Force
DATE: March 15, 2023



Chair Neron, Vice Chair Hudson and Wright, and members of the committee:

Oregon Food Bank’s mission is “to eliminate hunger and its root causes... *because no one should be hungry.*” We pursue this goal in two key ways: we foster community connections to help people access nutritious food today, and we advocate to change policies that drive hunger and poverty in our region.

School meals are a critical element of student success — just as important to academic achievement as textbooks or transportation. Decades of research consistently shows that participation in school meals is linked with reducing hunger and increasing health and educational outcomes¹.

Children can’t learn on an empty stomach. Yet more than 114,000 kids in Oregon live in households that struggle to afford food. To put that figure into perspective, there are more kids facing food insecurity in Oregon than the combined population of Albany and Springfield. And this data does not yet account for the rising cost of food in recent months, nor the dramatic cuts to SNAP funds for groceries that 410,000 Oregon families are experiencing right now as pandemic-related federal food assistance expires.

We know that longtime, systemic injustices mean that kids here in Oregon and across the country experience hunger and poverty at different rates. Kids who are Black, Indigenous and Latinx are more than twice as likely to struggle to afford food as kids who are White. Kids in households that rent their homes are six times more likely to experience food insecurity than kids whose parents own their homes.

By ensuring every kid — no matter their race, gender, religion or immigration status — has access to healthy meals while at school, we can position students for success in the classroom and beyond to help address these historic inequities.

Oregon Food Bank supports HB 3030 as amended, which creates the Healthy School Meals for All Task Force. Healthy School Meals for All - offering breakfast and lunch to students at no charge - improves educational and health outcomes, and even increases lifetime earnings - especially for low-income students². In addition, it reduces the stigma sometimes associated

¹ https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning_FNL.pdf

² <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/swedish-school-lunch-reform-nutrition-and-lifetime-income>

with school meals, advances racial equity, eliminates “school lunch debt,” and supports working parents. Where it is in practice, it’s a critical element of a healthy school environment. Just as we do not means-test for things like tuition, buses, and textbooks, neither should we for school meals. No child should feel singled out for standing in line for lunch.

The Task Force brings together stakeholders to design and recommend a legislative proposal that will make it viable for schools in rural, urban and suburban communities across Oregon to offer breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge to families. The Task Force will build on Oregon’s success in increasing access to school meals and put us on a pathway to ensuring every student has the resources they need to learn, grow, and thrive.

Oregon is a leader in access to school meals, yet many students are still left behind

Prior to the Student Success Act, about one quarter of Oregon schools participated in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which allows schools with higher rates of kids experiencing food insecurity to offer breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge.

Through the Student Success Act, Oregon took bold steps In 2019 to increase access to school meals in every corner of Oregon. At the time, this was the most significant expansion in school meals nationwide. This included the creation of a fund that doubled the number of schools participating in CEP to 693 schools - that’s 55% of Oregon schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program. This includes many entire school districts in every corner of the state, like Salem-Keizer, Coquille, Woodburn, Klamath County, Nyssa, and many more.

During the pandemic, Congress authorized a nationwide waiver that allowed all schools nationwide to offer meals to all students at no charge, no matter their household income. Without these waivers, the alarming spikes in childhood hunger caused by the fallout of COVID-19 would have been even worse. Sadly, the waiver authorizing free school meals for all students expired in June 2022. This means that 45% of schools in Oregon returned to means testing school meals. This was a major loss for parents and students. We are hearing early reports that school meal debt is sharply increasing.

Putting Oregon on a pathway to restoring healthy school meals for all Oregon students by creating the Healthy School Meals for All Task Force (HB 3030) is an important step toward restoring the ability of Oregon schools to serve breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge. Oregon has a strong foundation on which to build, and new federal options, like being able to directly certify students participating in Medicaid for school meals (coming to Oregon in SY ‘23-’24), and other potential federal rule changes will help us along the way.

As we emerge from the pandemic, we believe it’s not enough simply to return to normal. Normal wasn’t working for too many people. HB 3030 will put us on the path to build a brighter future for Oregon’s kids so everyone can emerge stronger.

