



Hand Up Project

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Testimony of Michael Whitaker

Executive Director, Hand Up Project – The People’s Pantry

In Strong Support of SB 1581

Oregon Legislative Assembly

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

My name is **Michael Whitaker**, and I serve as the Executive Director of **Hand Up Project – The People’s Pantry**, the only LGBTQ2SIA+ formed and led public food assistance program in Portland. Each week, we serve Queer and BIPOC families who face disproportionately high rates of food insecurity and structural barriers to safe, affirming access to nutrition.

I am here today to voice **strong support for Senate Bill 1581**, which would require Oregon school districts to provide **universal free breakfast and lunch to all students**, regardless of income.

This bill is not just good policy — it is lifesaving policy.

Why SB 1581 Matters to Food-Insecure Families

SB 1581 recognizes what those of us on the front lines see every day:

hunger follows children into the classroom.

According to the legislative summary, the bill ensures:

- School districts must offer **lunch and breakfast at no cost to every student**, eliminating income screening and stigma.
- Schools providing breakfast must make it accessible **even after the beginning of the school day**, removing barriers for late-arriving or transit-dependent students.
- The state will uphold **nutrition standards** for meals funded through state sources.

The measure digest further notes that Oregon students already face substantial hardship:

- **One in six children** in Oregon lives in a food-insecure household.
- Hunger negatively affects concentration, academic performance, behavior, physical health, and emotional well-being.
- Universal meals promote **equity, dignity, and inclusivity** and reduce stigma associated with free/reduced lunch programs.

At Hand Up Project, our data tells the same story. We served **over 9,000 shoppers and 15,800+ family members** last fiscal year, with demand rising every month. Families are making impossible choices between rent, transportation, and food — and when that pressure hits the household, **children are the first to feel it.**

As a Pantry Director, I See the Human Impact of Food Policy Failures

When school meals are not guaranteed — or when eligibility requires families to expose their financial struggles — many simply opt out.

For Queer families, immigrant families, and BIPOC households — groups who already face discrimination in other systems — income verification can be a barrier, not a gateway, to help.

Universal meals remove this barrier completely.

Every week, parents tell us they skip meals so their children can eat. Students arrive at our pantry after school exhausted and unfocused because they haven't eaten enough during the day. In my role, I see the direct connection between lack of school nutrition access and increased reliance on emergency food systems.

SB 1581 lightens that burden.

SB 1581 Strengthens Health Equity Statewide

Hand Up Project's mission is rooted in the understanding that **food is medicine**.

SB 1581 takes that same truth and applies it on a statewide scale.

The bill's findings explicitly recognize that:

- **Nutrition is essential** for student health and academic success.
- **Universal access improves health outcomes**, increases meal participation, reduces absenteeism, and improves behavior.
- Oregon has the opportunity to be a **national model** for universal meal access.

School meals are one of the most powerful health interventions a state can provide.

Universal School Meals Reduce Long-Term Pressure on Nonprofits

Food pantries like ours are facing:

- **Unstable federal support**,
- **A 40% drop in available food**, and
- **A \$2,000 monthly increase in purchasing** just to keep pace with demand.

Emergency food providers cannot absorb increased childhood hunger alone — nor should we.

SB 1581 is a structural solution to a structural problem.

When schools can reliably meet children's nutritional needs, pantries like ours can focus on stabilizing families rather than filling chronic gaps left by policy.

Conclusion: SB 1581 Is a Moral and Practical Imperative

Universal school meals are one of the most dignified, effective, and equitable tools Oregon has to support its children. SB 1581 affirms that **no child should have to learn on an empty stomach**, and no family should be stigmatized for accessing the food their kids need.

As a pantry director, as a community member, and as someone who hears directly from impacted families every single week — I urge you to **pass SB 1581** and commit Oregon to a future where every student is nourished, supported, and ready to learn.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to Oregon's children.

Sincerely,

Michael Whitaker, Project Director
Hand Up Project- The People's Pantry