



Feb 3, 2026

Dear Chair Frederick, Vice Chair Weber, and members of the Senate Education Committee;

My name is Cristobal Castro, and I am the Director of Nutrition Services for the Lake Oswego School District (LOSD). This is my fifth year with LOSD, and my tenth year working in school nutrition. In Oregon, I have experienced the period of universal free meals during the pandemic, the subsequent transitions, and the lowering of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) threshold. I'm writing to urge you to support SB 1581, which would reduce stigma around school meals and improve access for all students in Oregon.

This school year, we've been conducting meal surveys with students and their families. In the survey, we ask students if they eat school meals; if they answer no, we ask them why. Typically, students cite reasons such as bringing lunch from home, a parent packing it, or being a picky eater. The response that stands out, and one that the proposed bill can directly address, is the stigma around school lunch.

"School lunch stigma" is not a term we hear directly from students, but our office hears it regularly from parents, even if they do not use that exact phrase. Parents have concerns about being added to the free or reduced-price (F&R) meal list. They worry about their students knowing they're on F&R meals or their neighbors finding out. As a result, some families choose not to complete F&R applications and deny benefits, such as Medicaid, to avoid being on any list. We have students whose F&R benefits have been forfeited because families do not want to be identified this way.

Our Nutrition Services office regularly speaks with families to reassure them about confidentiality. We explain that F&R information is not shared and that no one outside our office has access to our meal software system. Unfortunately, those assurances are not always enough to convince families to apply for or maintain their benefits.

Based on our experience providing free meals to all during the pandemic and at our CEP-eligible school, we know that removing stigma increases student participation. When stigma is eliminated, more students eat school meals, and access improves significantly.



Families also experience relief from the financial burden of paying for student meal balances.

River Grove Elementary is currently our only elementary school implementing CEP, which provides free meals to all students. At that school, breakfast participation increased by 27% and lunch participation by 20% compared with prior to CEP. More students are eating meals there now than during the pandemic period of universal free meals. We have even come to refer to River Grove as our "taste-testing" elementary school because of the high level of participation.

Providing free meals for all ensures that every student is nourished, supporting health, well-being, and academic success while also delivering real economic benefits for our employees, communities, and the state. If all schools followed River Grove's example, we would end the school year with a positive financial impact. This would allow us to expand staff contract hours, hire additional employees, and improve staff retention in a field where recruitment is already challenging.

In our kitchens, this funding would enable us to replace aging equipment, improving space and efficiency. It would also enhance the ability to prepare scratch-made recipes with fresh ingredients, offering healthier, more appealing meal options for students. Expanding scratch-made cooking would, in turn, increase our ability to source local ingredients from Oregon farmers and food processors.

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter. I urge you to vote yes on SB 1581. This legislation presents an opportunity to make an impact in Oregon that extends far beyond the cafeteria.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cristobal Castro'.

Cristobal Castro
Director of Nutrition Services
Lake Oswego School District