



February 3, 2026

To: Senate Committee On Education
From: Patti Whitney Wise, on behalf of Partners For a Hunger-Free Oregon
RE: Support for SB 1581, School Meals For All

Chair Frederick, Vice Chair Weber, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Patti Whitney-Wise, and I am the former Executive Director of Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon and the Oregon Hunger Task Force. I officially retired in 2016, but have failed retirement several times because I care about these issues so much.

We are living in extraordinarily challenging times. While none of this feels easy or familiar, it is not the first moment of crisis I have witnessed. When I joined the Oregon Hunger Task Force as staff in 1996, Oregon's participation in food assistance programs was modest, and many families were falling through the cracks. Through sustained collaboration among state agencies, legislators, schools, and community partners, we strengthened the food safety net and improved outcomes for children and families. We stand at a similar crossroads today.

Federal actions have once again destabilized household food security. Policies that exclude immigrant and refugee families from SNAP, combined with the loss of healthcare subsidies, have strained both low- and middle-income households. Families are facing rising costs across the board—with fewer resources left for food and other basic needs.

I believe deeply that just as we provide school buildings, teachers, and buses without charge, we should also ensure that children receive two healthy meals every school day. The evidence is clear: students who are well-nourished attend school more regularly, are better able to focus, and perform better academically. School meals are not an add-on; they are foundational to student success.

At a time when so much else is in flux, this is one action that:

- Reduces a major recurring household expense. Covering breakfast and lunch for every school day removes a significant cost burden, especially for families with multiple children.
- Protects families from rising food prices. When groceries get more expensive, school meals act as a buffer, stabilizing part of a family's food budget.
- Frees up income for other essentials. Money not spent on school meals can go toward rent, utilities, transportation, healthcare, or childcare. All of which are increasing in price for the average family.

- Supports working parents. Reliable meals at school reduce the need for time-consuming meal prep, helping parents balance work schedules and household responsibilities.
- Improves food security. Guaranteed meals at school reduce the risk that children experience hunger at home, easing pressure on family food budgets.
- Stabilizes family finances during crises. Job loss, medical bills, or unexpected expenses hit families hard; universal meals provide a consistent safety net.
- Strengthens local economies. Families with more disposable income can spend more in their communities, and school meal programs often purchase from local producers.

At a moment of great uncertainty and fear, passing school meals for all is one clear action the state can take to provide stability and hope. SB 1581 is a north star, an opportunity to show families that Oregon will meet this moment with compassion, foresight, and resolve.

I urge you to support SB 1581 and to help demonstrate that, even in times of chaos, we can choose policies that reduce fear, strengthen families, and invest in our children's future.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,
Patti Whitney-Wise