



To: Senate Committee on Education
From: Fatima Jawaid, Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon
RE: Testimony in support of HB 2536
Date: May 5, 2021

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

Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon requests your support for HB 2536.

"Actually, I'm glad that I can eat lunch at school for free. But I feel bad for my friends that don't qualify for it, because their families can't afford it either."

These words, spoken by an Oregon third grader in 2018, movingly describe why lawmakers prioritized expanding income eligibility for free school meals in the Student Success Act.

In Oregon, 1 in 3 kids who experience hunger wouldn't normally qualify for free school meals because their family income is above the federal threshold. Yet children who access school meals are shown to attend more days of school, improve test scores, be more likely to graduate, and earn more as adults. With 1 million Oregonians now facing hunger, free school meals during the pandemic have made a huge impact in our community this year.

In 2019 lawmakers prioritized expanding income eligibility for free school meals in the Student Success Act, as a step towards eliminating hunger in schools. The legislature said "students in households between 186 and 300 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) will become eligible for the free and reduced lunch program." Yet the interpretation of the current statute puts the burden on schools to "opt in" to implementing these expanded income eligibility guidelines, rather than this being the default (ODE Rule 581-051-0615). This creates the potential for some students facing hunger to have unequal access to free school meals, depending on where they live.

During the rulemaking process in 2020, over 40 school districts and community organizations joined us in asking that the income guidelines not be "opt in". It is simpler, more efficient, and more equitable to expand income eligibility consistently statewide to all schools that fall within the legislated criteria. However we learned that a legislative fix would be needed, which led to the development of HB 2536.



I'd like to briefly clarify one specific aspect of this policy: HB 2536 is not intended to require schools to begin serving lunch that are not currently doing so (there are a small handful of very small remote schools that don't for logistical reasons). Instead, it will clarify the income eligibility guidelines and state reimbursement level for schools that do serve meals.

All of Oregon's students deserve the opportunity to reach their full potential at school, regardless of where they attend. The Student Success Act meal policies, when fully implemented, will reduce stigma, create better learning environments, help students focus, advance equity, and reduce hunger in schools.

We urge lawmakers to ensure that all schools participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) - but that do not offer universal school meals through a federal provision - will automatically become a school with Expanded Income Eligibility for school meals at no charge.

We believe the language fixes in HB 2536 reflect the original intent of the legislature, and the best interest of our children, and ask for your support of this bill.