



March 24, 2023

To: Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Education
From: Our Children Oregon, The Children's Agenda
RE: Support for HB 5014, Budget Request for Healthy School Meals for All

Dear Co-Chair Frederick, Co-Chair McLain, and Members of the Committee,

The Children's Agenda, convened by Our Children Oregon, brings together ~130 organizations statewide to create a holistic legislative agenda dedicated to improving the well-being of Oregon's children, youth, and families. Our collective created a 2023 legislative agenda that focuses on community-driven solutions to provide access and opportunities for all children and families.

On March 22, 2023, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), which oversees school meals, announced a [game-changing proposal to reduce child hunger in schools and ensure access to school meals for all. Once finalized, hundreds more schools in Oregon will be eligible to serve breakfast and lunch at no charge to all students without applications](#) through the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

The Hunger-Free Schools provisions in the Student Success Act were designed to maximize the number of schools participating in CEP. Because this announcement was made so recently, the Oregon Department of Education is currently analyzing both the impact of how many schools will be eligible, and how much additional funding will be required to bring Oregon into alignment with this new rule. **We request sufficient funding in HB 5014 to ensure the Hunger-Free Schools Account can fully utilize this new option as soon as it is available.** Sufficient funding allows all schools eligible for CEP to ensure it is financially viable, just as the Student Success Act intended.

When kids are hunger-free, they focus and learn better in school, which sets the stage for them to excel in many other areas of life. Unfortunately, far too many children in Oregon are not receiving the healthy start they need and deserve. According to OCO's Oregon KIDS COUNT Data Cards, 15.4% of children are experiencing food insecurity, which is about 132,500 kids in Oregon.¹ Furthermore, Lincoln County has the highest number of children (24.4%) who are experiencing child food insecurity in Oregon, followed by Coos (23.6%) and Grant (23.4%) counties. Research shows that food insecurity can have major impacts on children's well-being.

¹ <https://ourchildrenoregon.org/publications/oregon-kids-count/>

A 2017 review found that even small levels of food insecurity impacted mental health and academic performance, such as a higher likelihood of repeating grades, lower reading and math performance, and higher rates of anxiety and depression in students.²

Oregon has made progress to ensure that more students are well-nourished and prepared to learn, and we must continue that momentum. In 2019, the Oregon Legislature passed the historic Student Success Act, which expanded access to nutritious meals at school for students facing food insecurity. Oregon has since doubled the number of schools – from 25% to 55% of Oregon schools – offering breakfast and lunch at no charge to students. However, with the expiration of the federal waiver, 45% of Oregon schools are no longer able to provide this opportunity. With the new USDA proposal, **we expect hundreds more schools will become eligible for CEP.**

We can do right by Oregon's kids by allocating funding in HB 5014 to sufficiently maximize the impact of this rule. This will mean more schools, and even more school districts, will be able to offer breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge, benefiting students, families, and schools. We urge the committee's support. We thank you for your time and efforts to improve child well-being across the state.

Sincerely,

Ivy Major-McDowall
Policy and Advocacy Director

View the 2023 Children's Agenda at www.ourchildrenoregon.org/2023-childrens-agenda

² <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28134627/>