

February 20, 2025

TO: House Committee on Education
FROM: Grace Fortson, Our Children Oregon
SUBJECT: Support for HB 3435

Chair Neron, Vice-Chair McIntire, Vice-Chair Dobson, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Grace Fortson, I am the Policy and Advocacy Manager with Our Children Oregon (OCO). OCO is a statewide nonprofit committed to whole child wellbeing through the Children's Agenda- a comprehensive legislative agenda created and supported by our over 135 member organizations across the state.

I am here to represent not only my own personal support of School Meals for All, but also the support of our entire Children's Agenda coalition who voted to prioritize this bill as a key way to support children and families this legislative session.

As of 2022, 17.3% of Oregon's children experienced food insecurity. That means 144,000 individual children. This number is up almost 5% from 2021. I spent a year teaching children between the ages of 10 and 20. One consistency I found across this age range was that the students who could afford lunch were able to focus better in the afternoon. As anyone who has spent the 30 minutes before lunch time with kiddos can attest, hungry children are not regulated or focused children.

So it makes sense that healthy, nourished students not only perform better in

school, they attend school more often! According to our partner, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Oregon unfortunately ranks 43 out of 50 states in education based on four key indicators: school attendance for young children (ages 3 and 4), fourth grade reading proficiency, eighth grade math proficiency, and rates of on-time graduation. **Therefore, ensuring that children are present and ready to learn is paramount to improving Oregon's education and improving outcomes for children after graduation.**

Beyond food security and educational impacts there is also an important economic impact here. In a state where 13.8% of children are in poverty and 50% of renting families experience rental cost burden, it is unconscionable to perpetuate School Meal Debt. This not only bars students with families experiencing poverty from accessing vital resources, it also is a form of public shame.

In conclusion, Oregon's children need inclusive and accessible meals. Beyond the numbers, let's think about the intangible impacts of this policy: the shift in each hungry child's educational experience and the ways that each educator will benefit from working with a more engaged classroom. We are so close to making School Meals For All a reality here in Oregon and fulfilling our shared responsibility to ensure that children are healthy, nourished, and well educated without burdening struggling families. **I urge you to vote yes on HB 3435.**

Thank you,

Grace Fortson, Policy and Advocacy Manager, Our Children Oregon

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