



GROWING STRONGER TOGETHER

Oregon House Committee on Education
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court St. NE,
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Dear Chair Neron, Vice-Chair Dobson, Vice-Chair McIntire, and esteemed members of the Education Committee:

My name is Cassandra Bull, and I am a policy specialist at the National Farm to School Network. Our Network has more than 20,000 members across all states and US territories, including many partner organizations in Oregon. Our mission is to increase access to local food and nutrition education to improve children's health, strengthen family farms, and cultivate vibrant communities.

National Farm to School Network strongly supports House Bill Number 3435. This bill would make Oregon the ninth state to adopt a School Meals for All policy (a.k.a. universal meals), ensuring that all students receive nourishing, high quality food in schools regardless of income, boosting local agricultural economies, and supporting families in Oregon.

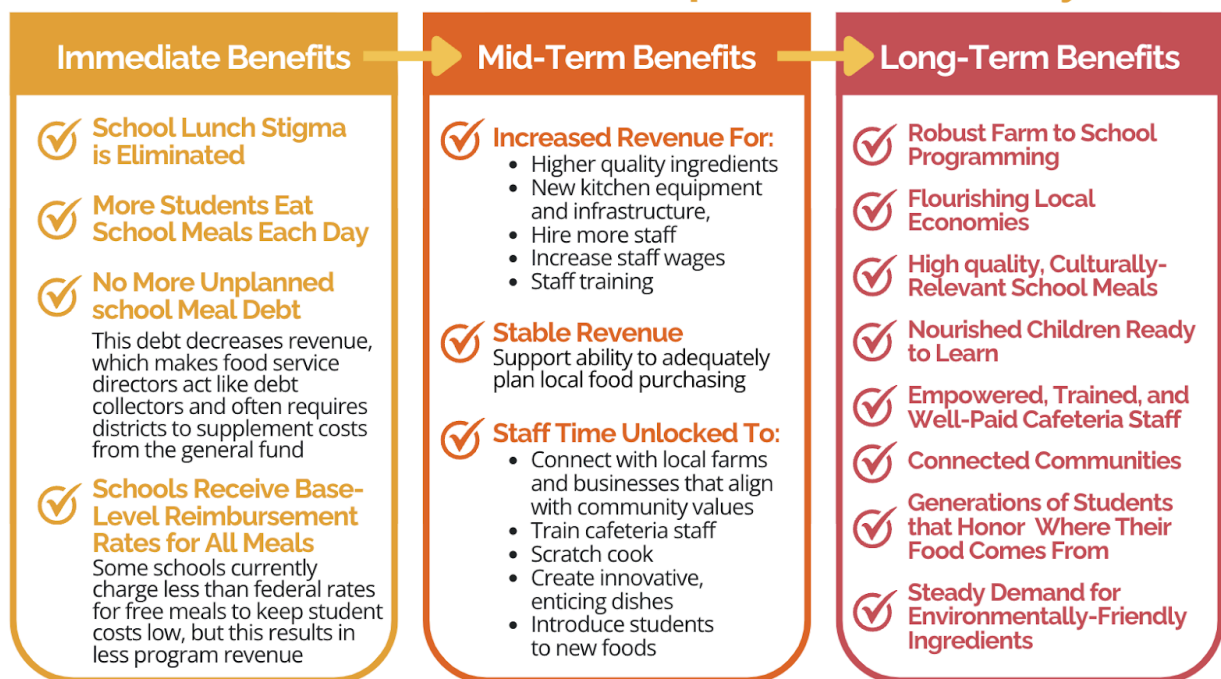
While the current Student Success Act was an incredible nation-leading step forward in increasing access to school meals, it is time to close the gap for the 6% of school districts who do not qualify for this program. Hunger knows no geographic border. Even in “wealthy communities” or in households with incomes above the threshold for federal school meal support, we know that the high cost of living makes it difficult for many families to make ends meet. A School Meals for All program provides ***immediate financial relief for working-class families*** with school-aged children. The Oregon School Meals for All coalition estimates that this would **save families \$1,441 per year per child.**[1]

School Meals for All Supports Farm to School:

In addition to the numerous other testimonies you will receive about the benefits to families and children regarding test scores, stigma, and mental and physical health – which are so important – my testimony focuses on why this legislation will also benefit the local **agricultural economy**.

Investments in universal meals programs and a fully funded grant program that reimburses schools for local food and educational costs, which Oregon already has in place, creates a positive feedback loop - a “Virtuous Cycle.” By increasing the number of kids eating at school, School Meals for All generates more revenue for schools, which in turn allows for more local purchasing, elevating the quality of meals overall. This improved quality, along with farm to school programming, further increases participation and interest in school meals—thus creating the Virtuous Cycle. The results are improved student outcomes, a strengthened local economy, and the elimination of stigma from eating school meals.

Farm to school and School Meals for All are two sides of the same coin—both essential to enhancing school meal programs. They are more powerful together. On one side, School Meals for All policies ensure that all students have reliable **access** to nutritious meals. On the other side, farm to school policies improve meal **quality** and contribute to broader community impact. The following model illustrates our theory of change on how School Meals for All can transform school meals:



See our resource: *Graphics That Demonstrate The Mutual Benefits of Farm to School and School Meals for All* [2]

While these programs are still new, here's the evidence so far:

- School Meals for All programs dramatically increase school meal participation. [3] In California, Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont, which all have had two full years of state-funded Healthy School Meals for All, **overall participation increased 6-25% and breakfast increased 10-36% in year two of implementation compared to pre-pandemic levels.** More kids eating healthy school meals means a larger market demand for local food.
- In December 2024, USDA released a nationally representative report that found schools in School Meals for All states were *more likely to*:
 - **Increase local purchasing** in school year 2023-24 (28% vs. 21%)
 - **Increase scratch cooking** to address supply chain challenges (40% vs. 32%)Additionally, there is a statistically significant correlation between schools increasing scratch cooking and increasing local food purchases. [4]

Fully Reimbursing Schools for Meal Costs and Investments in Kitchen Equipment and Upgrades are Vital for This Policy:

An important piece of this bill is that it provides **baseline meal reimbursement levels** for schools that already offer free meals in Oregon. Currently, the Student Success Act provides school districts with less than 100% the federal reimbursement rate for each meal they serve. With food costs continuing to rise, schools have been in a predicament where they are cutting meal quality and staff wages because of this underfunding.

Lastly, the \$4 million investment in kitchen equipment and infrastructure is a key component of this bill. With more kids eating school meals daily, schools with outdated kitchens will face even greater strain. **Investing in kitchen upgrades equips schools with the necessary tools to prepare fresh, high-quality meals,** supporting both nutrition standards and the ability to incorporate more local ingredients – reinforcing the positive cycle created by School Meals for All.

In conclusion, this bill would ensure that all Oregon students—regardless of income—have access to nutrient-dense school meals. This progress, in addition to Oregon's already well-rounded farm to school program, will culminate in a triple win for kids, farmers, and communities. **Alongside the 84% of residents that support School Meals for All** (including 69% of Republicans and 80% of independents) [1], we urge lawmakers to support this bill. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Cassandra Bull

References:

- [1] School Meals for All Oregon. (2025, Feb.). “Oregonians Want School Meals for All.” <https://schoolmealsoregon.org/oregonians-want-school-meals-for-all/>
- [2] National Farm to School Network. (2024, February). *Graphics That Demonstrate The Mutual Benefits of Farm to School and School Meals for All*. <https://www.farmtoschool.org/news-and-articles/graphics-that-demonstrate-the-mutual-benefits-of-farm-to-school-and-school-meals-for-all>
- [3] Bull, Cassandra. (2024, Nov.). *Meal Participation Continues to Rise in States After Two Years of Healthy School Meals for All*. National Farm to School Network. <https://www.farmtoschool.org/resources-main/meal-participation-continues-to-rise-in-states-after-two-years-of-healthy-school-meals-for-all>
- [4] USDA Food and Nutrition Service. (2024, Dec.). *Results of USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service-Administered School Food Authority Survey III on Supply Chain Disruption and Student Participation*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/schoolmeals/sfa-survey3-scd>