

February 23rd, 2025

Chair Neron, Vice-Chair Dobson, Vice-Chair McIntire, and members of the House Committee on Education,

My name is Ben Turner, I live in House District 21, and I'm writing to urge you to SUPPORT House Bill 3435, which would strengthen Oregon's existing free school meal program and make it universal. This bill is very important because childhood food insecurity is a serious and worsening issue in our state: data from Feeding America's most recent *Map the Meal Gap* report shows that about 144,000 children face food insecurity in Oregon—that's one in six kids!¹

I work at a food bank,² and we are being overwhelmed by the level of need in our community; we've seen huge increases in the number of households visiting our food pantries over the past few years. While the work we do is important, Oregonians are in serious need of policy solutions like Schools Meals for All that would help keep families from needing to visit a food bank in the first place.

Thanks to previous efforts by the Oregon Legislature, such as the Student Success Act of 2019, almost all schools in Oregon already offer free school meals. For a cost that's comparable to that which the state currently spends for non-universal meals,³ HB 3435 would get Oregon over the finish line, ensuring that free school meals are offered universally in Oregon. This is a very popular idea: 84% of Oregonians support universal free school meals.⁴

Again, I urge you to SUPPORT HB 3435 and children in our state who face food insecurity. No child in Oregon should ever go hungry.

¹ Dewey, A., Harris, V., Hake, M., & Engelhard, E. (2024). Map the meal gap 2024: An analysis of county and congressional district food insecurity and county food cost in the United States in 2022. Feeding America. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/map-the-meal-gap/by-county>

² A am not submitting this testimony on behalf of my employer. I'm just writing as a concerned citizen whose work strongly informs my perspective on the need for School Meals for All.

³ Botkin, B. (2024, October 20). State lawmakers push to expand free school meals program for all in Oregon. OPB. <https://www.opb.org/article/2024/10/20/oregon-free-school-meals/>

⁴ GBAO. (2025, January 23). Solving Hunger: Oregon Research Findings [Results Memo]. https://schoolmealsoregon.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/GBAO_School-Meals-Oregon-Memo