

Submitter: Debby Webster
On Behalf Of:
Committee: House Committee On Education
Measure, Appointment or Topic: HB3435

To: House Committee on Education

From: Debby Webster, Rainier School District
Subject: Yes on HB 3435

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

My name is Debby Webster, Nutrition Services Director, Rainier School District. I am a Strong supporter of House Bill 3435, School Meals for all, which would ensure that every Oregon student has the food they need at school, regardless of where they live in the state or how much money their parents make.

As the Director of School Nutrition for 30 years, I have seen a lot of students go through the system. During my career my favorite program has been the Summer Lunch Program, because I can feed all children no matter where they come from or their economic status. Free meals for all would give us a similar flexibility. All students enrolled in our school can eat with no charge taking away the stigma that if you are eating you must be low income. No student in Oregon should go hungry at school, no matter where they live, or how much money their family makes.

It is important for families to have stability and know that their meals will be at no charge. Going back and forth is very challenging. During COVID meals were free for all, then we moved to a year and a half of charging for meals. During this timeframe we were so short staffed that reaching out to families with a negative balance was time prohibited. This means that many of our families have a really high debt from meals served to their student(s). We sent out messages that there was a cost for meals, but families still did not realize they were being charged. We had messaging every month in our elementary newsletter with the cost of meals and methods families could use to pay for their meals.

It is heartbreaking when a student comes to you and says, "Do I have money on my account?" and you have to reply no and they walk away because they are fearful of having a negative balance and what will happen at home if that happens. We want to feed this student and would, but we have to charge their account, so they choose not to eat. The hardest part of our job is turning a student away when the parents are not able to pay for their child. We need to take care of our kids and feed them no question asked.

Here are some comments from students in my district:

- One student shared that it is important to provide meals for students at no cost because it takes the stigma away from the meal. You never know the other person's story and it allows all students to be fed and ready to learn.
- Another group of students commented that they know students in our district that depend on the school meals. These students do not have a lot of food at home and these meals are the only meals the students get. The meals at no charge helps make sure all students are fed and it is a benefit to our learning. (Sometimes these are the students that make just a little too much to qualify for free/reduced meals.)
- When I was in another district where students had to pay for meals, I struggled with how I was going to get lunch. My mom was struggling financially and I won't eat at school in fear of having negative debt my mom could not afford. We did not qualify for free or reduced meals.
- Having breakfast and lunch available at school gives me the stability of knowing that I will not be hungry. I really like the coffee at breakfast as it helps keep students awake in class when they have stayed up late the night before.

As you can see from student accounts, providing free meals for all take the burden of eating lunch away so our students can concentrate on their education.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Debby Webster
Nutrition Services Director
Rainier School District